WINTER 25c

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Christian Was A Fighting Man

GALL AND GUNSMOKE

by J. M. Decker

She Had The Touch of Death

BOOTHILL BLONDE

by W. J. Reynolds

Oil and Cattle—And War

THE WILDCATTER

by Joseph Chadwick

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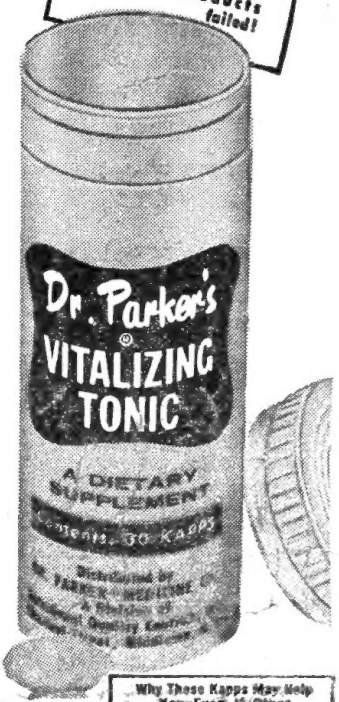

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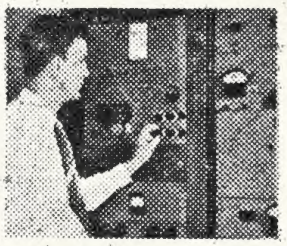
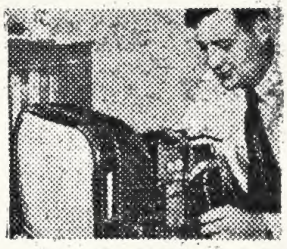


The hundreds of TV and Radio stations on the air offer interesting jobs for Operators and Technicians.



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TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE EXCITING ACTION NOVELS

VOL. 19, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION WINTER, 1958

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

Z. SCHROEDER, *Ass't Editor* VIC SAN LUCAS, *Art Editor* F. BIERMAN, *Associate*

GALL AND GUNSMOKE

Between them and Mary Jordan's land stood Will Christian, a real salty fighting man—and he knew they were out to drop him dead

J. M. DECKER 12

BOOTHILL BLONDE

Rich, rock-hard and beautiful, her touch spelled death to a man

W. J. REYNOLDS 38

THE WILDCATTER

He was headed for hell at a lope when the lovely Tracy busted in

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"I was able to play many pieces in a short time. Course opened door to popularity, wider circle of friends."—Peter H. Kozyra, P.O. Brokenhead, Manitoba. (Picture at left)

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Now Plays at Church

"I had tried several times to start music lessons. I had been depending on a teacher before. Now I play at church, etc."—Mrs. P. J. Tatman, Sycamore, Illinois.

THE TRAIL BOSS

BEAR MAN OF THE SIERRAS

By Robert Stephens

THE hunter who stumbled on to the camp of James Capen Adams in the mountains north of Yosemite was pleased at the prospect of a warm fire and company. He hurried closer to the fire, but his greeting froze on his lips when one of the sleeping figures awoke and sat up. The hunter found himself staring into the small, wicked eyes of a huge California grizzly bear.

Luckily for the hunter's peace of mind, the other recumbent figure was human. A white-bearded, white-haired man with keen, humorous eyes sat up and spoke sharply to the bear, who growled but lay down docilely. James Capen Adams then introduced his bear companion as Lady Washington, the best grizzly in California. On cold nights, Adams explained, he snuggled close to the bear for warmth. With a fire on one side and a warm grizzly on the other, even the rigorous winters of the Sierra were comfortable.

The pop-eyed hunter allowed that there was no accounting for tastes, but that if it were left up to him he would just as soon freeze on the bear side. Adams finally prevailed on him to stay for a meal of bear steak and spend the night at the camp, under a bearskin robe.

For "Grizzly Bear" Adams was a connoisseur of bears. They were his closest companions, they formed a staple item of his diet, and for amusement he fought them hand to hand. The bites and scratches that were an inevitable result of his association with his ferocious playmates were often dressed with a salve of bear oil.

Adams was born in 1807 in Massachusetts and brought up to be a shoemaker. Though he learned his trade adequately, something in his makeup yearned for nobler things, and he became a collector of wild animals for a traveling show, trapping these in the Maine woods. It was while working for the show that Adams first displayed the fantastic courage that was to stamp his career in the mountains of California. The results of what Adams calls with fine understatement, "this unfortunate affair," almost cost him his life.

A royal Bengal tiger belonging to the show had become hard to manage, and Adams volunteered to restore discipline. He entered the cage several times, emerging unharmed until the final try. The tiger sprang upon him, inflicting such severe wounds that Adams was almost totally disabled. He gave up hunting and went back to his last. For fifteen years he worked as a shoemaker only to lose his savings in a speculative venture.

This was in 1849. Adams' health had improved so much that he gave up his trade and joined the gold rush, hoping to make a fortune. He had no success at mining, but managed to do well in ranching, building up herds of cattle worth thousands of dollars. At the very peak of his fortunes destiny again took charge. Rustlers wiped out his herds in a single night.

Adams had had enough by 1852. He became a self-confessed misanthrope. With two rifles, a Colt revolver, a wagon and some knives he headed into the Sierra, resolved to live as a hermit. He picked as his retreat a gulley thirty miles north of Yosemite, where he built a shelter with the help of some Indians and outfitted himself with buckskin clothing.

The region was thick with grizzly bears, and Adams instantly became fascinated with

(Continued on page 8)

How You Can Master GOOD ENGLISH

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THOUSANDS of persons make mistakes in their everyday English—and don't know it. It is surprising how many persons fail in spelling such common words as "business," "judgment," "beneficiary," and "receive"; say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me"; use "who" for "whom"; and mispronounce the simplest words. And it is equally astonishing how few know whether to use one or two "c's" or "m's" or "s's" (as in "recommend" or "disappoint"), or when to use commas in order to make their meaning clear. Most persons use only common words—colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, humdrum.

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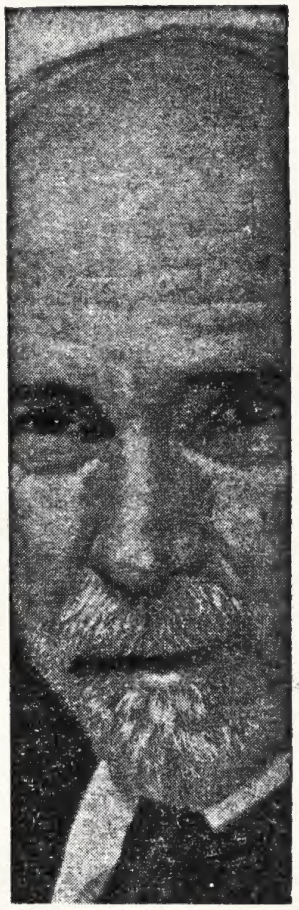

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 (Continued from page 6)

the huge, powerful beasts. The strange streak in his nature that had impelled him to enter the tiger cage finally reasserted itself. His brother William sought Adams out and persuaded him to trap various California fauna for sale to zoos and animal shows. Adams was back in the wild animal business, after almost twenty years.

He hired three assistants and set out to roam the Oregon-Washington country. They built traps, and by the end of the season had an assortment of live bears, foxes, wolves, panthers and other species. Led by Grizzly Bear Adams himself, a whooping, snarling, screeching caravan made its way toward Portland, a sight that was said to have popped the eyes of the inhabitants of the region. The whole melange of wild beasts was sold in Portland, except for the grizzly named Lady Washington, which was to be the first of Adams' trained bears.

Adams returned to his Sierra Nevada camp to spend the winter with Lady Washington and a small dog. During the winter he trained the bear to pull a sled and carry a pack, a feat that few would care to attempt today.

In the spring of 1854 Adams decided on a trip to the Yosemite valley with a Mr. Solon of Sonora and two Indians. Near the headwaters of the Merced River he found a grizzly den occupied by a worthy adversary, a bear of such size and ferocity as to gratify his wildest dreams. He shouted to bring the grizzly out of its cave, fired the rifle and rushed forward through the undergrowth with his pistol and knife. The grizzly came to meet him, but fell from the effects of the well-placed rifle shot before Adams could close with it. He emptied his pistol and fell on the dying bear with his knife.

In the den he found two cubs, one of which, Ben Franklin, was to supersede even The Lady in his affections. The other he gave to Solon. Solon meanwhile had managed to get himself thoroughly bitten and clawed by a panther, and Adams applied his medical skill, which was both original and drastic. He prescribed the "water cure," which consisted of dousing the patient with icy water. At the point where Adams shaved Solon's head with his hunting knife, the agonized patient howled that Adams was worse than the panther, but the imperturbable hunter merely directed an Indian helper to hold Solon down.

Adams eventually left the mountains and, with Ben Franklin, Lady Washington and other assorted animals, began to give exhibitions in San Jose and Santa Clara. He settled in San Francisco and established his show on Clay street. It was here that he met Theodore Hittell, a reporter to whom he narrated his *Adventures*.

In 1860 Adams moved to New York where he gave shows under contract to P. T. Barnum. He died in the same year. His own surgical methods had been inadequate treatment for his severe wounds, and one head injury had been complicated by further injury from one of his animals on the trip from San Francisco.

The character that emerges from the pages of the *Adventures* is intensely human. Adams refers to himself proudly as "the Old Hunter," and pictures himself as unequalled in the crafts of hunting and trapping. He was probably not an easy person to get along with. His ideas of courage were definite, and what might seem normal prudence to an ordinary man was rank cowardice to the Old Hunter. He delights in telling stories of the ignominious flights of his various assistants, each incident topped with a lofty lecture on the theme of cowards.

Adams' severe judgments of the characters of his companions extended to the characters of the animals around him. Panthers and other members of the cat family he regarded as cowardly and treacherous. Other undesirables were coyotes and wolves. "Die, coward of the wilderness!" Adams would exclaim, as he killed a coyote.

It was for the great bears that he reserved his admiration. In size, ferocity and courage the California grizzly had no equal, according to James Capen Adams, and they easily outranked all living creatures, both as friend and adversary. To him the great bear symbolized the power and poetry of creation. They were more than animals; they were a way of life.

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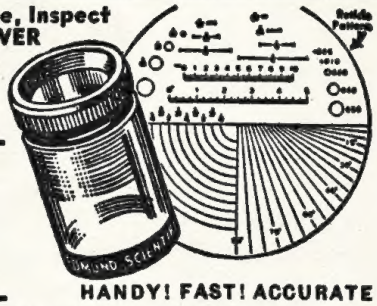

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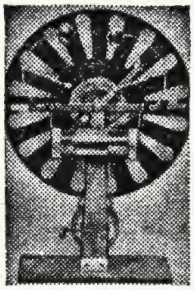

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THE first ordinance that El Paso passed when it became an incorporated town, back in 1873, specifies that it is a misdemeanor for any person to wade, paddle, swim, dive or duck in the waters of any irrigation ditch within the city limits. So you better just float quietly on your backs, boys—at least while the gendarmes are near.

* * * * *

During the ruthless slaughter of the buffalo in the early West, when 60,000,000 animals were reduced almost to extinction, some were killed merely for their tongues. We say, with tongue in cheek, it shouldn't happen even to a sharp talking mother-in-law, or the like.

* * * * *

The town of Vernal, Utah, issues bona fide licenses to "hunt, pursue, shoot and kill" dinosaurs. Vernal is only twelve miles from Dinosaur National Monument, where fossil remains of the ancient monsters have been discovered. Wonder what's the bag limit on dinosaurs, and do they maybe allow at least one bull tyrannosaurus rex?

* * * * *

The National Bank in Washington, D.C., has discovered that Davy Crockett, King of The Wild Frontier, was once among its depositors. Its ledgers show that on April 8, 1834, the frontiersman entrusted forty dollars to the bank's care. But three days later Crockett, who came to Washington to serve as a Congressman, withdrew the money. Apparently, on mulling it over, he thought better of such citified nonsense.

* * * * *

And speaking of money, for $551.25 one T. E. Smith has bought himself a Western ghost town. For that price he got himself thirty-six buildings in Husted, Colorado, which has been pretty much deserted for years. A Colorado Springs real estate man, Mr. Smith figures he can't go too wrong buying a town, no matter what its condition, for that kind of money these days. But what, pray tell, was the 25¢ for?

* * * * *

Shades of High Noon! Gary Cooper, the perennial Western star, was born of British parents. But I say there, old chaps, it is quite all right, for it happened at Helena, Montana, and Gary was plenty tall in the saddle before he became a movie star.

* * * * *

Although it isn't generally realized, cattle brands are always read in a specific sequence. The parts of a brand are read from left to right, if in a horizontal line; from top to bottom, if one is above the other; and from outside in, if one encircles or boxes another. Enough to make a body cockeyed, or at least outside-in-eyed.

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A Novel By J. M. DECKER

Gunsmoke

Between them and Mary Jordan's land stood Will Christian, a real salty fighting man—and Will knew they were out to drop him dead

I

WILL CHRISTIAN rode into the Rafter J ranch yard in the soft darkness of early evening. The barns and outbuildings were vague shadows of darkness, dimly seen, but the ranch house was marked by orange-yellow rectangles of light from the kerosene lamps. Will drew his horse to a halt in the hard-packed yard and sat staring morosely at the lighted windows. Presently he saw the slim shape of Mary Jordan cross between the lamp and the window, and he thought of the news he had to tell her and swore and started his pony across the yard toward the dim shape of the barn.

He stepped off at the barn and stripped off the saddle and blanket, throwing them across the upper corral rail. His horse was green and shied back at the sudden move-

ment, flaring at the end of the reins. Will jerked him down savagely, and was immediately disgusted with himself for taking out his temper on the bronc. He spoke soothingly and raised a careful hand for an apologetic rub behind the ears, before removing the hackamore and listening to the animal trot off into the night.

With the hackamore draped across his arm, he leaned his long frame against the barn and rolled and lit a cigarette. The brief flare of the match revealed a face that was almost Sioux in construction. High cheek bones ran down in a flat plane to the hard line of his jaw, and his eyes were widely spaced and deeply set. Only the fact that his eyes were gray and his nose was straight, without the high-bridged arch, broke the Indian illusion.

It came to him that he was deliberately delaying, prolonging the suspense for Mary Jordan because he was reluctant to face her. It was not a flattering thought, and he crushed out his cigarette, hung the hackamore on the saddle horn, and started across the yard with hurried, angry strides.

The girl who opened the door was not the type a man would ordinarily avoid. Her eyes were a deep green, almost blue, with tiny golden flecks in them and shading to a near purple at the edge of the iris. Her skin was so fair it appeared almost translucent, in striking contrast to the luxuriant blackness of her hair.

She studied Will Christian's face and read her answer there and some of the straightness went out of her back. She said, "So he meant what he said in the letter." It was a statement, not a question.

Will closed the door behind him and followed her into the room. "He meant what he said." His voice was rigid with suppressed anger.

She turned to face him and her green eyes were puzzled. "But why? I should thing the bank would be glad to extend that note with the security they've got. Does Kreh feel that because dad was—was killed, I won't be a good risk?"

"I don't know what Ellis Kreh feels," he said. "I'm not sure a banker feels anything. All he'd say was that note gets paid in eleven days, when it's due, or he'll foreclose on you."

"But he told dad he'd extend it until fall!"

He said patiently, "There's no record of it. I reckon if your dad had lived Kreh would have extended. Because he knew damn well if he broke his word John would have called him out and shot him." He stared somberely at the flat-crowned hat he held between his hands. He added, "Maybe that's not such a bad notion at that."

The girl moved across the room and laid her hands on his. The top of her head came barely to his shoulder. "Now Will, don't start going wooly on me."

Will Christian looked down at her. He had know this girl for fourteen years, since he had ridden into the Rafter J yard, a gangling young man of fifteen looking for his first job, and the little six year old girl playing there had assured him she'd make her daddy hire him because, 'you're not so old either and can play with me.' In that fourteen years he had risen from the lowest form of life on a ranch, the cook's helper, to the top position as foreman.

NOW, as he looked into her eyes he felt the tense anger draining out of him. He gave her a rueful smile and said half seriously, "All right, I'll stay peaceful. But I still think it's the best idea I've had all day."

"Will, what will I do now? Is there any way I can raise it in time?"

"Mary, I don't know," he said frankly. "You've got plenty of friends that would be glad to make you a loan—if they had it. But last winter was as rough on your neighbors as it was your dad, most of them had to borrow to buy feed too. Right now I doubt if you could round up a stray thousand dollars in the whole blamed territory."

"But couldn't we sell off enough cattle to meet it?"

"If you had them out. Dry cows, yearlings, steers—they'll average out about twenty dollars. Eight hundred head would do it."

Her eyes cleared and she said almost cheerfully, "Why then there's the answer!

Surely eight hundred head wouldn't leave us short —"

He interrupted patiently. "Mary, they're on summer range. They're in the mountains. Scattered from hell to — well they're just scattered. In the fall, when they're working down ahead of the winter, I could pick up twice that many in a week. In midsummer it's a different proposition."

"But if there's no other way —" she said, and let the words hang between them.

He said briefly, almost harshly, "Short of using a gun on Kreh there is no other way. I'll try a gather. But we've only got eleven days, and that includes getting them here after the gather and then driving them into town. It's not likely that we can do it." With the decision came realization of how pressing time really was, and he was ridden by an urgent need to be moving.

He put on his hat, gave the girl an absent, comforting pat on the shoulder, and started for the door, explaining as he went, "I'll have to tell the boys what's coming so they'll be ready for it, we'll be rolling out early in the morning." He reached the door and opened it and then hesitated and turned back. He said, "You'd better pack what you think you'll need to keep you in town. You can't stay here alone. I'll get the crew started in the morning and then take you in."

She started to argue with him, but something in his expression reached her, and she only said, "I'll be ready. But won't it delay you?"

"No, I'll get the boys started with the cavvy and a camp outfit and then take you in. We'll have to set up a camp at Healy Springs before we go to work, and I reckon they can handle that without me. I can ride out from town and get there by the time they're ready."

"All right, Will," she said.

Then he added, "Anyway, I've got to see about a buyer. I heard Lloyd Wellman is buying for the Diamond A in Montana, but he wasn't in town this afternoon. I'll have to find him in the morning."

She said again, "All right, Will," and watched the door close behind him. She listened to the fading sound of his footsteps, then she sat down in her father's old leather chair and buried her face in her hands.

Will Christian crossed the yard and opened the bunkhouse door. He stepped in and closed the door behind him and paused a moment, surveying the five men before him.

On a bunk at the back of the room lay Greasy Tom Bedloe, the outfit's cook. Greasy Tom was as fat as his name suggested. He suffered considerably with the heat, and from the first of June to the end of September his dark, round face was continuously shiny with a thin film of perspiration. He had a butter-soft heart that he did his best to conceal behind a fascade of sarcasm and psuedo truculence. The curse of his life was his kindness. He longed to be a cold-blooded dangerous desperado — and he could not stand to see two chickens fight for fear they might hurt each other.

Sitting alone in a corner, with his chair propped against the wall, was Red Ryan. It was normal for Red to be alone. He had joined the Rafter J two years before and given the name Red Ryan. It was the last bit of personal information he ever divulged. He was a skilled, efficient cowpuncher, and earned every dollar he drew in pay, but he never joined the other men in their amusements. He spent his idle hours sitting alone and looking into space. He wore a gun always, even at meals, and at night slipped it under his blanket. His orange-red hair was still unmarked with gray, and he could have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty.

AT A table in the middle of the floor sat two more men intent over a pack of dirty cards. The older of the two was a gnarled, leathery old man with a fringe of almost white hair surrounding a surprisingly pink bald head. He had that enduring, rawhide toughness common among old men who have spent their lives in the saddle. He had worked for the Rafter J for twenty-three years, and would have risen to foreman long ago, had it not been for his weakness for liquor. Regularly, on the first day of every second month, he would draw his pay and head for town, where he would stay for exactly four days. He never offered an explanation and was

never asked for one. His name was Otey Mueller.

The other man was a Mexican, Diego Ramirez. He was a big man for a Mexican, six feet two and a hundred and eighty pounds. In common with most Latins he had a taste for flashy, flamboyant clothes that set off his dark handsomeness. He was particular about his person, and remained neat and clean under what sometimes appeared impossible conditions. He was gay and cheerful and laughing with all men but his enemies. With his enemies he was as merciless and as deadly as a coiled rattler. His friends called him Poco.

The fifth man, watching the card game, was hardly more than a boy. He had pale gold hair that would have been the envy of a Nordic god, and eyes as softly gray as a mourning dove's wing. He was as big as Poco Ramirez, but his face was still soft and unformed and he looked very young. If his horse didn't fall on him or somebody didn't shoot him or a steer didn't gore him, he would grow up to be a man with a character of his own. Until that time he borrowed his character from the men he admired. At the moment he was being Poco Ramirez. His name was Johnny Waters.

Will Christian moved forward to the table and sat down. He watched the fall of the cards silently, and when the last one dropped he said, "All right, I'd like you all to hear this." He spoke quietly, but there was a quality in his voice that caught their attention instantly. "We'll be pulling out of here tomorrow at sunrise, with a pack outfit and supplies for ten days. We're going to set up camp at Healy Springs and start chousing cows out of the mountains."

He knew they must be ridden by curiosity at his intention to pull cattle off the summer range in the middle of the season, but nothing more than polite interest showed on their habitually controlled faces. Only Otey Mueller said mildly, "Little early for a roundup, ain't it Will. About three months early."

"It's early all right," Will said. "Or too damned late. Depends on how you look at it." He knew these men were loyal, and capable of tremendous feats of labor if they understood the need for it. He gave them a detailed review of what had happened, ending up with, "And so we've got eleven days, counting tomorrow. Eleven days to push them out of the mountains and deliver to the yards in Parade."

For a long moment nobody spoke. Then Poco Ramirez stretched his powerful arms over his head and indulged in a wide yawn. He relaxed and flashed his white grin at Will.

He said in his precise English, "It is a thing that is not possible. But for the small Miss Mary we will do it."

Will couldn't resist a smile at Poco's unfailing good nature. "We'll give it a hell of a try, at least." The smile disappeared and Will stood up. His voice was abruptly crisp and decisive. "Johnny, I'll want the horses in by four in the morning. All of them. A full string for each and every man. It's going to be plumb rugged on the ponies."

He turned to Greasy Tom Bedloe. "We'll need rations for ten days. If we're not back by then there'll be no use in staying any longer. You'd better get it packed tonight, we'll be rolling by five."

He turned back to Otey Mueller. "Lloyd Wellman is buying for the Diamond A. I'll have to go to town in the morning and see if I can find him. I'll take Mary in with me—she can't stay here alone." Otey nodded and Will went on, "You'll be in charge until I get back. I want a camp set up at Healy Springs and some sort of a barrier thrown across the mouth of the canyon just below it. We'll need someplace to hold the stuff we pick up until we get the herd built."

Otey nodded. "All right, Will, we'll be there."

Will walked to the door and opened it. He started out and hesitated and turned around. He said, "See that every man has his gun and a rifle. It's not likely they'll be needed, but Kreh sounded like he wanted the Rafter J, and if he wants it bad enough, and things we're going to cut it in time, he might try something rough." He stepped through the doorway and disappeared into the night.

II

THE little town of Parade lay drowsy and lifeless at the junction of the White River and the Sioux. Later, in the cool of evening, it would come to life with the shopping and visiting and idling town people. Later still it would grow noisy and boisterous with celebrating cowboys and farmers and ranchers and drifters lucky enough to break the monotony of their lives with a night in town.

Now, at nine o'clock in the morning, it looked like a ghost town. Already the heat waves danced and shimmered along the dusty main street. Two neglected horses, standing hip-shot at the tie-rail in front of the Buckhorn Bar, were the only living things in sight.

A spring wagon, with a saddle horse tied to the tailgate, turned into the deserted main street and drew up in front of the Sutton Hotel. Will Christian stepped down from the seat and offered a hand to Mary Jordan.

"You go along in and have Mrs. Sutton get you settled. I'll leave your things in the lobby and take the team to the livery stable," Will said.

Mary laid a hand on his forearm and said, "You'll drop by before you leave, and tell me how you made out with Wellman?"

"I'll drop by," he said, and started unloading her luggage.

With the team disposed of at the livery stable, Will untied the saddle horse from the tailgate and rode back down town. He stepped down in front of the Buckhorn, tied his mount beside the two already tethered there. He crossed the splintered board walk, pushed open the swinging doors and went in.

The Buckhorn was a big place. A long bar extended the length of one side, with poker tables and a faro layout occupying most of the other side and the center of the room. At the back was a roulette wheel, and behind that an open stairway that ran diagonally across the rear wall to the rooms on the second floor.

The room was deserted but for a swamper, pushing a broom in a discouraged manner among the tables, and behind the bar, the owner of the place, Darby Fleer.

Will walked up to the bar and rested his arms on the polished surface. "Howdy Fleer. Have you seen anything of Wellman this morning?"

Darby Fleer raised his eyes. They were a pale gray, too light for his olive complexion, so that even his most casual glance had an appearance of intensity that was oddly disturbing. He had a pleasant, cultured voice that was vaguely shocking because it was so contrary to the gray deadliness in his eyes.

"Lloyd Wellman?" he asked. "No, he hasn't been around. Perhaps he isn't up yet. He was—ah—around quite late last night."

Will said, "Do you know where he's staying?"

"Yes, I believe it's room nine, in Mrs. Sutton's hotel," Fleer said.

"Thanks," Will said and straightened up. He had known Darby Fleer since the man had moved into the country two years before, and from the beginning he had felt an instinctive antipathy that he had never stopped to analyze. He had never had a disagreement with the man, and yet he found it difficult to even speak to him with ordinary civility. He was turning to go when Fleer's voice stopped him.

"I hear the Rafter J is going to be pulling some cattle out of the mountains," Fleer said. There was nothing unusual in his voice, but far back in his pale eyes a bright spark flickered and was gone.

Will turned back slowly and rested his forearms again on the bar. "Now that's an odd thing for you to hear—" he spoke softly—"considering I've known it myself for less than twelve hours."

Darby Fleer's voice spoke blandly. "Now where could I have heard about it last night. Most unusual." This time there was no mistaking the note of insolent amusement in his smooth voice.

Will's first reaction was a blazing anger at the man's apparently pointless goading. And then it came to him that he was being baited, and the knowledge served to steady him. It occurred to him that two could play at the same game.

"You'll have to think of a tougher one than that, Fleer. You got it from Ellis Kreh." An idea came to him and he tried a shot in the dark. "By the way, how much of you does Kreh own? All of you, or just enough to make you mind?"

THE blind shot found a better target than he had hoped. For a moment he thought Darby Fleer was going to come across the bar and attack him with his bare hands. The man's olive face turned a sickly yellow with the force of his passion, and his pale eyes were like two cauldrons of molten lead. His effort to control himself was heroic.

He said in a carefully expressionless voice, "Ellis Kreh owns no part of me and never will. Your efforts to irritate me into telling you anything you wish to know will get you nowhere."

Will gave him the edge of a hard grin. "You got tangled up in your own rope that time, Fleer. Until now I hadn't known you could tell me anything I wanted to know."

Will knew it would be useless to push the man further, and he was suddenly pressed by the need to get to Healy Springs. He turned away and walked to the door, and as he passed through it he was remembering that last thing he had seen in Fleer's eyes. It was a thing that should not have been there. A subdued but unmistakable gleam of triumph, as though the man had a secret that only he could see and appreciate.

The memory of that look bothered him all the way to the Sutton Hotel and up the stairs to room number nine. It was only when he heard Lloyd Wellman's grumbling bid for him to come in that he shook it clear of his mind and concentrated on the business at hand.

Lloyd Wellman sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. He was a short, round little man with sad brown eyes and a thinning remnant of fine brown hair.

He looked like a man who would have been well suited to a job as clerk in an obscure book store, but fate and his early training had ordained that his one talent should be a remarkable eye for judging the age, weight and condition of cattle. As a result he found himself working as buyer for various big cow outfits. His job required a good deal of riding, for which he was physically completely unsuited, and as a result he drank too much to relieve his aches and pains. He longed to quit, but he was well paid and had developed expensive tastes, and he could never quite bring himself to the decision.

The eyes that he raised to Will were haggard with last night's release. "For God's sake Will, don't tell me you want me to go out again today!"

Will grinned at him. "No riding, Lloyd. I'll bring them right into town for you."

The little buyer looked relieved. He said somewhat suspiciously, "The Rafter J selling cattle this time of year?"

Will had no intention of giving away the weakness of his position. He counted Lloyd Wellman as a personal friend, but he knew the little man was loyal to his employers first, last and always, with no room for sentiment in his dealing.

"Could be we're figuring on raising sheep," Will answered. "Now, are you buying cows or running a newspaper?"

Lloyd Wellman sighed and stood up. He closed his eyes for a long, painful moment, and then moved unsteadily to a scarred buearu against the wall. He said, "A short shot of the hair of the dog, Will, and then we'll see. I reckon I'm still buying cows."

A half hour later Will left the room with Wellman's agreement to buy eight hundred head of mixed stock from the Rafter J at twenty dollars a head. There remained now but the problem of delivering them—and a nagging memory of the look of secret triumph in Darby Fleer's eyes.

Mary Jordan was waiting for him in the lobby. She looked surprised when she saw him coming down the stairs. "I didn't see you come in. How did you get up there?" she asked.

He said banteringly, "I move fast—like a coyote," and added more grimly, "For the next couple of weeks I'm likely to have to."

"Did you see Wellman?" she said eagerly.

"I saw him. It's all set up. All but the

small detail of how to get them here in time."

She said pensively, "Yes," and for a long moment they were both silent. Presently she added, "I—I don't suppose you could take time to have dinner with me before you ride out?"

It was a tempting thought, but even as he hesitated he knew it was impossible. "Sorry, Mary. There's not enough time as it is. I reckon I'd better not waste any of it."

She moved closer and laid a slim hand on his arm. "You be careful, Will. Don't work so fast you—I'd rather lose the place than have you, or anyone, get hurt."

"I'll be careful," he replied, and smiled at her. He touched her shoulder and walked away.

III

THE water hole called Healy Springs was well back in the mountains, near the center of the Rafter J summer range. The springs were near the mouth of a wide canyon, forming a small creek that wandered down the canyon some three hundred yards before it disappeared back into the earth. The canyon extended west from the water, gradually climbing and narrowing until, two miles above the springs, it was pinched out entirely by encroaching pine trees and sterile, rocky ridges.

A mile below the canyons mouth, riding toward the camp at Healy Springs, Will Christian came across the tracks. He reined in his horse and sat looking down at them, a frown gathering between his eyes. There were the tracks of many horses, not more than an hour old, and almost certainly those of the Rafter J crew. But they were headed away from the springs instead of toward them.

Will leaned from the saddle and studied the trail in frowning concentration. Abruptly he straightened and lifted his mount to a high lope toward Healy Springs.

As he rounded the last bend he came upon the Rafter J crew building a rough brush and sapling barrier across the mouth of the canyon, and his apprehension momentarily eased, only to return even stronger as Poco Ramirez dropped the pole he was

Will thought of this other man, and knew a savage burst of jealousy

carrying and jerked out his gun and whirled to face the sound of Will's approaching horse.

Will rode on up to Poco and pulled in. The tension in him put an edge to his voice, harsh even to his own ears. "What in hell's going on here? Where're your horses?" he called.

Poco pushed his gun back into the holster. He looked embarrassed, and said, "Ah, the horses. Well, the horses, Señor Will, the horses — they are gone."

"Gone?" Will said shortly. "Gone where?"

The rest of the crew had drawn around them, and Otey Mueller answered. "I reckon a six-year-old kid could have run things better than I did, Will. We weren't here an hour when they were run off."

Will swung one leg across the pommel and reached into his pocket for the makings, deliberately forcing himself to relax. He said calmly, "All right, Otey, let's have it."

"Well," the old man said, "we got here along about one o'clock, and I figured we might as well eat first before we started working on this fence. I figured we'd be at it most of the afternoon and didn't see any reason why the ponies should stand around hungry while we worked. They'll likely get gant enough anyway before this is over. So I told the boys to turn them loose, leaving only Johnny mounted to ride herd on the rest of them."

The old man paused and Will said, "Sounds all right to me, I'd have done the same."

"Well," Otey said, "We were sitting there eating and all at once a couple of rifles turned loose from up there in the trees. They killed Johnny's horse deader'n a sheep herder's honor, and the rest of them ponies lit out like a pack of turpentined coyotes." He paused, and added sadly, "There wasn't nothing we could do about it, being afoot that way."

"All right Otey, don't let it worry you. You couldn't have seen it coming." A sudden thought came to Will and he said, "Darby Fleer's got a hand in this!" He saw the blank look on Otey's face and added, "I had an argument with Fleer this morning and he was mad as a gored bull, but underneath it all something was amusing him. I reckon he knew what I was going to find when I got here."

"Señor Kreh and Señor Fleer are like the salt and the pepper. Always they are together," Poco said pleasantly.

Otey asked, "But even if he's backing Kreh's hand, how in hell would Fleer know we'd be here?"

Will said, "Fleer knew we were going to start picking up cattle. Kreh must have told him he was calling that note, and he knew there was only one way we could meet it. This place has got feed and water and a place to hold the stock we pick up, it wouldn't take much brains to guess we'd start here. He probably took the chance and sent out a couple of his hard-shelled hands with orders to wait 'til we showed up and see what they could cause in the line of trouble. They saw their chance and took it."

"Well, if they figured to throw a kink in our rope they sure as hell picked a good way to do it," Otey said morosely.

Will dropped his leg off the pommel and found the stirrup and straightened up. "Maybe," he said, lifting his reins. "They've got less than an hour start and they likely won't be pushing it. Knowing you boys are afoot they'll figure they've got plenty of time."

"You watch it Will," Otey said. "There was at least two rifles up there in the trees and there could have been more."

"I'll watch it," Will said, and reined his horse around riding back down the canyon the way he had come.

HE RODE at a high lope to the point where he had crossed the tracks, and there he pulled down to a trot, a gait that rolled up the miles without being too severe on his mount. He was aware of a violent, frustrated anger that urged him to push on down the trail at top speed, but his horse had already covered a good many miles, and he knew he didn't dare risk pushing the animal too hard, only to come upon the stolen herd and be defeated in the end by an exhausted mount.

The tracks continued for two miles at a

steady gait, and then Will began to see signs here and there where a horse had split off from the bunch and cropped a few bites of wheatgrass before being sent on by the following riders. The signs confirmed Will's guess that the raiders wouldn't be hurrying, and he urged his horse to a faster gait with renewed hope.

The canyon grew steadily wider, and in the middle of the afternoon he came to its mouth where it opened out on the broader valley of the Sioux river. The tracks led straight across the valley, through the shallow Sioux, and on across the other side to enter another feeder canyon leading in from the east.

Will pulled in on the far bank of the river and leaned down from the saddle to study the trail. Water still stood in the crescent shaped hoof prints, and the dry earth was spotted with darker spots where water had dripped from the wet bellies of the passing herd. Considering the heat of the sun he knew he was not more than fifteen minutes behind the herd, and he raised his eyes to study the canyon up which the trail led.

This country was as familiar to Will as his own back yard. He knew the canyon started out westward and then swung gradually north, forming a great quarter circle some five miles in length before it crossed the ridge at a low saddle known as Galena Pass. The bottom of the canyon was grassy and easy traveling, but the sides were steep and boulder covered and thickly grown with pines. They were not impassable to a mounted man, but it would be almost impossible to force a herd of tired and hungry horses to tackle their steep slopes. The men ahead of him had no choice but to follow the canyon on up to the outlet at Galena Pass.

By going north up the valley of the Sioux, and then climbing straight up the ridge to the east and following the ridge top, Will knew he could cut across the points of the quarter circle and save some two miles to the pass. The climb up the east ridge would be savage, but it offered at least an outside chance of reaching Galena Pass before the herd. He picked up his horse's head and turned north up the valley of the Sioux.

The climb up the east ridge was even worse than he had anticipated. On several of the steeper slopes he was forced to dismount and lead his horse to conserve the animal's faltering strength. He climbed until his lungs seemed to be bursting and whirling black pinwheels spiralled before his eyes. Behind him his horse's harsh, blowing breath was an accompaniment to the violent pounding of blood in his ears. The ridge top seemed miles away and grew closer with an agonizing slowness. He was staggering like a drunken man when he finally reached the crest and threw himself down for a brief moment of rest on the thin carpeting of pine needles.

The ridge top was, mercifully, comparatively level. He led his horse for several hundred yards until its breathing slowed, and then he stepped back into the saddle and picked up a faster gait, gradually increasing his speed as the animal recovered from the savage climb.

Galena Pass was empty of fresh tracks. Will stepped down from the saddle and stood in the trail to listen, welcoming the rest and the release from the need to hurry. He took the time to roll a cigarette and light it and then got back into the saddle and rode slowly down the trail up which the herd would come.

As he rode he pondered the best course to follow when he met the herd. By withdrawing into the timber on one side of the draw and letting the herd pass him he would stand a good chance of capturing the men who had stolen them. But in the attempt he might be forced to shoot, and the sudden sound of his gun would start the horses running over the pass and down into the canyons on the other side of the range. Burdened with his captives, he would be unable to follow them and would lose at least another day following them later. It was too great a risk to be taken.

IV

HE CAME to the reluctant conclusion that his only choice was to jump the point of the herd and stampede them back through the men who drove them. The raid-

ers would not be expecting an attack from the front, and in the confusion he would stand a good chance of getting through. He would probably find himself engaged in a running fight, but at least the stolen herd would be heading back down the canyon toward the Sioux Valley and the camp at Healy Springs.

He knew his appearance would have to be sudden and noisy to strike panic in the herd and send it doubling back too terror-stricken to be stopped. He chose a narrow bend in the canyon with a pile of huge boulders on the inside corner. Backing his horse behind the concealing rocks, he pulled his carbine from its scabbard and settled himself to wait.

His wait was not long. He was aware of the herd first as a muted rumble of sound. The rumble grew louder, and he was able to pick out the individual clicking sound of hooves striking on rock. Then he heard the distinctive sigh of their collective breathing and the gentle rustle of disturbed grass. A moment later the lead horse appeared around the corner.

Will took a deep breath and drove home the spurs and slammed into the open, his carbine letting go in a burst of orange flame and thunderous sound between the confining walls of the canyon.

The front of the herd recoiled and curled back upon itself like a wave striking a rock wall. Will added a wild yell and slammed into them, firing the carbine into the air as rapidly as he could work the lever. Two seconds after he broke from cover the herd was a thundering mass of heaving backs and streaming tails fleeing back down the canyon in headlong, panic-stricken flight.

Will rammed the carbine back into the scabbard and drew his Colt, a handier and more accurate weapon for close range shooting from the back of a running horse. He let his horse have its head, running flat out on the flank of the terrorized herd.

Through the haze of dust he could see a rider racing along the right fore-front of the herd. The rider was bent low in the saddle and firing into the ground ahead of the leaders, in an apparent attempt to turn them into the timber where the trees would break the momentum of the stampede.

The crouching man formed an almost impossible target, and Will laid his sights down on the racing horse and pulled the trigger. He missed the first shot and took more time with the second and this time the bullet found its mark. The horse's front end broke down and its head bent under and it went over in a sprawling somersault. The rider shot forward in a long, flat dive and hit the ground rolling and scrambled desperately aside from the following herd.

At the same instant another gun began beating up its sullen thunder and Will was aware of a rider converging on his left. The man was slightly ahead of him and coming in at a sharp angle to cut him off. Will held a little ahead of the moving target and touched off the gun and knew instantly that he had over led. He took more time with the second shot, and so rapidly were the horses converging that he was less than thirty feet from the other man when he fired.

The bullet seemed to lift the raider from the saddle. His gun spilled from his hand and he made a weak grab at the horn and then his body relaxed and slipped sideward off his horse. He hit the ground and bounced and came to rest sprawled in the grass with the boneless abandon of a broken doll. Will swept on by and around the next bend in the canyon on the trail of the runaway herd.

The run continued half way to the Sioux River before it began to slow. Almost imperceptibly the sense of panic ebbed and the run became a gallup and then a lope. The lope slowed to a trot for a hundred yards and then the tired horses dropped into a walk.

Will let them take their time. He glanced behind him frequently, but no sign of pursuit developed and he concluded that the two men had been all there were. He pushed across the Sioux and entered the canyon leading to Healy Springs just as the sun disappeared behind the mountains and the sudden shadows drifted across the land.

He arrived at Healy Springs three hours after dark, his way dimly lit by a pale half moon riding low in the sky. The Rafter J crew had finished their rough fence, leaving a narrow gap in the middle, and he pushed

the horse herd through and used his rope for an impromptu gate to close the gap. He left the horses to shift for themselves, knowing they wouldn't climb out of the steep walled canyon, and rode on to the campfire that flickered at the springs where the crew was camped.

THE roundup began at dawn the next morning.

Greasy Tom was up an hour before the first pale light showed in the east. He built up his fire and moved a fire-blackened kettle of beans—cooked the afternoon before—closer to the flame. Into a cast-iron skillet went thick strips of fat salt-pork. The squaw bread was mixed directly in the top of the flour sack, a hollowed out place in the tightly packed flour serving as a mixing bowl. When the salt-pork was done it was forked into the kettle on top of the beans, and into the quarter inch of hot grease in the skillet, Greasy Tom dropped the hand formed balls of squaw bread. He braced the coffee pot against the fire and walked over to Johnny Waters' bed-roll and prodded Johnny with his toe. He said, "Roll out of it, cowboy. You aiming to sleep all day? The sun'll be up in another hour."

Johnny grunted and sat up. His youthful face was still sandy with sleep and he scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand. It was only necessary for him to pull on his pants and boots and he was dressed. He stood up and yawned and walked away into the darkness, reappearing a few moments later leading the wrangling horse by its picket rope. He put on the saddle and hackamore and stepped on—jerking the animal's head up with early morning temper when it tried to hog with him—and rode off into the night.

By the time he returned with the horses the rest of the crew was up and gathered around the fire, and a faint line of light outlined the mountains to the east. He swung the bunch expertly into the rope corral, tied the gate shut behind them, and joined the other men at the fire.

Breakfast was quickly over. The men helped themselves from the kettle of beans and salt-pork and a pan heaped high with squaw bread. They ate, as always, without speaking. As each man finished he dropped his plate in the dishpan, dipped out a cup of the black, boiling coffee, and squatted on his heels to roll a cigarette and enjoy a few minutes of talk before the day's work began. Coffee finished, the men rose one by one, got their throw-ropes from their saddles, and walked over to the rope corral.

Each man caught his own horse—choosing it with an eye to freshness and suitability for the day's work—from his individual string. As the last man led out his mount he left the gate open behind him, leaving the rest of the bunch free to wander back up the canyon and graze, until they were picked up again at noon for such men as were in camp and in need of a fresh mount.

The sun was a fiery red ball, perched on the rim of the eastern range, when Will Christian led the way out of camp. Greasy Tom was already busy at his dishpan, and concealed in the timber that lined the edge of the canyon, young Johnny Waters waited with a rifle in his hands and watched the herd of grazing horses.

Two miles from camp the riders came to a fork in the canyon, and there they divided. Will sent Otey Mueller and Red Ryan up one fork, taking the other one himself with Poco Ramirez as his pardner. For the rest of the day the men would work in pairs.

The valley, up which Will and Poco rode was still in shadow, but some four miles ahead the light cliffs of the limestone rim were a pale gold in the sun. A faint blue shadow ran diagonally upward from the bottom to the top. This was Saddler's Road, the only trail for many miles that climbed the rim.

Will's eyes were on the rim as he rode. He was thinking of the day, two months before, when John Jordan's battered body had been found at the foot of the cliffs beneath Saddler's Road. The old rancher's horse lay close beside him, and there was hardly an unbroken bone in either of their bodies. Apparently the horse had shied or slipped or stumbled on the narrow trail above and carried its rider with it in a three hundred foot plunge to the boulders below.

At the time there had been no suspicion of foul play; the old rancher was not the first man to die when his horse failed him. It came to Will now that it may not have been the accident it seemed, but a deliberate and well planned murder.

V

HE PULLED his eyes away from the rim and glanced at his companion. He said, "Poco, the day we found the old man—do you remember anything that didn't look natural about the thing?"

Poco's shrug was typically Latin. "I saw no bullet hole, Señor Will," he said.

Will glanced at him sharply. "I don't recall mentioning bullet holes."

Poco's dark eyes were injured. "I am not the fool. You look at the rim and you think of the Señor John, no? And then of the Ellis Kreh who wants the señor's ranch, and you wonder if this Kreh has long waited for the señor to die. And then you think, 'Ah! maybe he grow tired of the wait and help to make it short.' "

Will said dryly, "And then I say, 'Poco, you plumb missed your calling. You could have made a fortune as a mind reader.' "

Poco flashed his brilliant smile and dropped his eyes modestly. "It is not the difficult thing, my friend. I only used the head."

"Good. Maybe you can use it some more and tell me where Darby Fleer fits in."

Poco frowned. "You are sure he is in this thing?"

Will's voice was flat when he spoke. "I'm sure. I reckon Kreh's behind it, but he wouldn't have been man enough to lay the old man low, and you can bet your bottom dollar he didn't hire those horse thieves. He's too cautious a hand to do anything that might be traced back to him."

Poco lifted a casual hand. "Ah, then it is very simple. We will shoot this Darby Fleer, and if the trouble stops I will say, 'Señor, you are the smart man.' "

Will grinned at him. "You're a cold-blooded proposition, Poco. And what if the trouble doesn't stop?" he asked.

Poco said cheerfully, "Then we will feel very sad because we have been wasting the time. We will plant a rose on the señor's grave — and look for another man."

Will said dryly, "It's a tempting thought, but I think it's against the law. I reckon we'd better stick to the cows."

Ahead of the two men the gradually narrowing valley was finally pinched out by the encroaching timber. Here the casual, easy riding would come to an end and the day's work begin. They would start back down the canyon, one man remaining in the bottom to hold the cattle as they were gathered, and the other man riding up each feeder draw to push down the stock it contained. The man in the canyon had the easy job, having only to drift the already bunched cattle down the open valley. The rider in the draws was up against a tougher proposition. The cattle were reluctant to be driven from good pasture, and in the willow and aspen choked draws their constant efforts to cut back put a terrific burden on man and horse.

After each draw was driven the men exchanged jobs, giving the blown horse an opportunity to recover his strength in the comparatively easy work in the valley. It was slow work, and grew progressively slower as the horses became weary and less alert to the sudden break of a rebellious steer.

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon when Will and Poco arrived at the fork in the canyon where they had separated from Red and Otey. Their horses were gaunt and white-streaked from the rivulets of drying sweat. The two men drew rein and let the cattle drift, grazing, into the wide valley.

Poco sat slouched in the saddle. He said ruefully, "If I am not soon close to the beans of the Greasy Tom I am going to eat this horse."

Will only grunted an answer. He let his eyes drift over the grazing cattle and reached into his pocket for the makings. "They're adding up better than I expected," he said.

"It will be slower as we spread, but we will do it," Poco said practically.

Will lit his cigarette. "The feed's better than I'd look for, and they're staying closer to water. If we don't run into trouble we'll

cut it yet."

Poco sighed. "If we grow weak of the starvation, that would be bad trouble."

Will glanced at him and grinned and picked up his reins. "All right Poco, don't run it into the ground. We'll take them in and get fresh ponies. If we do as well this afternoon I reckon you'll really have an appetite for supper—if we get back for supper."

ONE day followed another with monotonous regularity. The horses lost weight steadily under the heavy labor, and the riders grew as gaunt and weary as their mounts. Their clothes were reduced to rags from constant, smashing contact with brush and dead branches. And on their faces and bodies were angry red welts and cuts and bruises attesting to the violence of some particularly wild race.

In the back of each man's mind was the memory of the raid upon the horse herd, and the conviction that more trouble would follow. As one day followed another and nothing happened, the tension increased and their tempers grew progressively shorter.

At dusk on the eighth day, Will Christian closed the gate behind the afternoon's gather and rode wearily after Poco toward camp. He found Red and Otey there ahead of him, already finished with their supper and taking it easy on their bed-rolls. He dismounted and turned his horse loose and walked over to crouch on his heels beside Otey's roll.

"I reckon we've got it made, Otey. How many did you and Red pull in?"

Otey sat up and stretched his aching legs and swore. "Forty-two. We worked from Preacher Spring clear to the mouth of Long Draw. Should have been more."

"Poco and I put in fifty-three," Will said. "According to my count we've got around eight hundred and twenty head in the valley."

"Be you a stranger around these here parts, podner?"

Poco strolled over and sat down on the edge of Otey's roll. His big frame sagged with weariness, and he looked sadly at the scratched and battered toes of his beautiful hand made boots.

"This is the bad work for the good boots," he said mournfully.

Otey grunted and stretched out again on his back. "This is bad work for the good hide, too. I reckon I ain't got two square inches on me that ain't been punctured."

"Ah," Poco said philosophically, "The hide will grow again, but the good boot is

spoiled for always."

"Don't let it break your heart, Poco," Will said. "We'll be back at the ranch by tomorrow evening and you can spend the rest of the night polishing on them."

Poco looked up. "We have the cows?"

Will said, "We should have. We'll count them through come daylight. If they add up to my figures we're on our way."

Poco was pessimistic. "Ah, first I spoil the boot, and tomorrow I will probably get another hole shot in the only shirt."

Otey growled disgustedly. "Turn it loose, Poco. We ain't had no trouble for a week have we? That first raid was likely just a couple of horse thieves." Poco disdained to answer such a weak argument, and Otey added defensively, "Well, hell! If somebody was trying to stop us, why ain't they done anything else?"

"They wait until it is easy," Poco said. "Here, the cows are spread in the valley and they cannot start the run. When we make the herd and are out of the valley, then will come the run. If they can break the bunch to scatter in the mountains, we will use a week to find them again, and then it is too late."

"Aw, you're stomach's gone sour. Go ask Greasy for a little soda and you'll sweeten up something wonderful," Otey said.

Will laughed and stood up. "All right, Poco, let's go have our bait before Greasy throws it out," he said and started toward the fire.

Poco followed and picked up a tin plate. "Still," he said, as though the conversation had not been interrupted, "I am right."

Will stood for a moment with his plate forgotten in his hand. He said throughtfully, "Not much doubt about it, Poco. But if they run we'll bend them. And if there's a fight, why, I reckon we'll fight. But day after tomorrow them cows are going to be in Parade!"

VI

THE herd was on its way an hour after dawn the next morning. Will rode the right point, with Poco on the left point and Otey and Red on the flanks. Johnny Waters drew the dusty job of bringing up the drag. And in the wake of the herd, Greasy Tom sat an unaccustomed saddle and swore at the recalcitrant cavvy and pack string.

As the herd settled into its road gait, Will relaxed in the saddle and let his mind run over the route they would follow. The rest of the forenoon would be spent driving down the canyon to the Sioux River. Then four miles up the valley of the Sioux to the gap in the mountains that opened onto the rolling, treeless foothills, and the home ranch. Both the canyon they were following and the Sioux river bottom were wide, grassy valleys, heavily timbered on the edges where the hills started up, but containing only a few scattered willows in the bottoms.

A stampede would not be too serious — if the leaders could be kept headed down the valley and the following cattle allowed to run themselves out until they could be brought under control. But if the leaders once turned into the timber, the herd would be broken into small, independent units that nothing short of fifty riders could hope to control. By the time they ran themselves out they would be scattered through the hills in fifty different directions, requiring another long and tedious roundup to gather them.

It never occurred to Will to doubt that an attempt would be made to break the herd. He was thoroughly familiar with men of Darby Fleer's type, and he knew that pride, if nothing else, would force the man to finish what he had started. Once out of the mountains and onto the treeless prairie, the herd would be infinitely harder to stop. Therefore, the attack would come in the mountains.

Will stood up in his stirrups and looked back along the long line of bobbing backs and waving horns, trying to picture how the thing would start. It would hardly come from the back or flanks, since such a move would only start the herd running down the valley where there was too much chance of their being brought again under control. It would come from the front, probably using the same tactics he himself had employed in recovering the stolen horses. Not knowing how or when the attempt would be made, there was nothing he could do but keep the herd moving and a sharp look out ahead

and hope that there would be at least a brief moment of warning.

The forenoon wore along and his nerves grew tighter as the valley of the Sioux became closer and nothing occurred. He found himself staring so intently at the trail ahead that his eyes were beginning to burn from the long periods in which he even neglected to blink. It came almost as a relief when he finally spotted a slight movement near the next bend in the canyon, some three hundred yards ahead.

The movement was so fleeting that for a moment he almost doubted his own eyes, and he glanced quickly at Poco across the bobbing backs of the lead steers.

Poco had seen it too. He waved an arm as though to get Will's attention and pointed at the corner ahead, and then turned his palm down and swung his hand in a flat out gesture at the ground.

There was no time to waste, and Will made his decision instantly. He knew cattle, and he knew that the slow moving herd could be easily turned back upon itself. He had seen as small a thing as a point rider's hat, blown across their front, send a herd stampeding to the rear in panic-stricken flight. But once running and in the grip of terror, they would run over anything that got in front of them with a complete lack of regard for the consequences.

Will pulled his carbine from the scabbard and signalled Poco and sent his horse plunging back along the line of cattle. He covered a hundred yards at a dead run, until he was well back of the point, and then he turned directly into the line and lifted his voice in a wild yell and started working the lever of his carbine. He was aware of Poco closing in on the other side, his gun spitting an almost continuous stream of fire, and even in that moment of desperate action he felt a brief thrill of admiration for the quickness with which Poco had understood his intention and acted upon it.

THE heavy thunder of the carbines seemed magnified a hundred times by the confining walls of the canyon. For the space of a single breath the cattle hesitated, and then the panic hit them and they were in a wild run. At the first shot the cattle ahead of Will sucked backward and for a moment it appeared the line might break, but the bovine instinct to follow the animal ahead proved stronger, and the line surged forward.

Will bent his horse parallel with the thundering herd and leaned forward along the animal's neck, racing for the lead. The tension of the forenoon had left him, and he was aware of a wild exhilaration in the release of violent action. Above the roaring clatter of hooves and horns he heard the thin sound of Poco's high yell, and the muted crack of Poco's carbine. He pushed his own carbine back into the boot and drew his Colt in preparation for what awaited him around the bend.

He was still a hundred yards behind the leaders when they hit the corner. It was, fortunately, a gradual curve, with a steep wall on the outer rim, and the lead steers stayed in the bottom. Will rounded the turn in time to see four riders driving in toward the point from one side of the valley, with the evident intention of turning the lead steers into the thick timber on the other side.

He drove in the spurs, trying desperately to extract the last ounce of speed from his already straining horse. He saw a jet of smoke leap from the front rider's gun as the man fired into the ground ahead of the first steer.

Will lifted his gun and held over and ahead of the first rider and pulled the trigger. Even as he fired he knew the range was hopelessly long for a hand gun, and he settled down grimly to closing the gap rather than empty his gun at an impossible target.

On the other side of the herd, Poco, too, was racing for the lead. But he had the long outside of the curve, and until the line straightened he could do little more than hold his own.

The first two raiders continued in their efforts to turn the stampede, but the two in the rear twisted in their saddles and opened fire on their pursuers. They too were using hand guns, and Will paid no attention to them, knowing it would take a fantastically lucky shot to connect. And then

he heard the blasting roar of a gun immediatly behind him and twisted around, half expecting to see more men converging on his flank.

Red Ryan was not four jumps behind. Apparently he had quit the flank and started forward at the first sign of trouble, and Will, in his preoccupation with starting the run, had failed to see him.

Red's sixgun was in its holster. He had wrapped his reins around the saddle horn, leaving both hands free, and he was using a carbine. He fired slowly and deliberately, standing in his stirrups to ease the jolt and steady the gun. For all the expression that showed on his reserve face, he might have been standing in the Rafter J yard shooting at tin cans.

Will was gaining steadily on the point, and at fifty yards he opened fire again. He knew the range was still long for the slow, .45 caliber bullet, but the lead steers were beginning to bend under the pressure and he dared wait no longer. He wasted the first two shots, but the third one found its target.

The man was turned in the saddle, shooting behind him, when the bullet caught him. He dropped his gun and slipped quietly out of the saddle, as though he had grown tired of it all and suddenly decided to quit. As Will thundered past he glanced down and saw the man lying peacefully on his back, his sightless eyes still holding a look of amazement.

The leader of the raiders stayed with the point, but his two remaining companions turned their fire on Will.

Will fired once more, and then the hammer clicked down on an empty shell and there was no time to reload. He rammed the gun back into the holster and was pulling his carbine from the boot, when Red's gun blasted once more from behind him.

The leader of the raiders jerked upright in the saddle and then pitched forward along his horse's neck. One arm was doubled across ahead of the withers, and he seemed to be trying to cling there. The horse shied violently sideward from the unfamiliar burden and the man hit the ground directly ahead of the thundering herd. The first steers missed his body, but the following cattle were blinded by the dust and pack ahead of them and he disappeared under the plunging hooves and surging weight of their massed bodies.

The two men remaining had had enough. With the fall of their leader they pulled away from the point and headed in a long diagonal toward the side of the valley and the protection of the timber.

Will let them go and raced on toward the front. The cattle had been pushed by the ambush successfully, but unless they could be brought again under control it would be a useless victory.

THE run continued on to the valley of the Sioux. By the time the herd burst out of the canyon and into the wider valley the big, lead steers were running with mouths open and tongues lolling. The rest of the cattle were strung out in the order of their strength, so that the line stretched for almost a mile up the canyon.

Will knew they would not run for more than another mile or two, but his horse was staggering under him and he doubted that the animal could carry him that far. He was riding close in on the flank of the big dun steer that led the herd. On the animal's other flank rode Poco. Between them they had a slight measure of control over the dun steer and thus over the whole herd, for where the dun steer led the rest would follow blindly.

Will made no attempt to turn the dun steer up the valley. He yelled to attract Poco's attention and waved his arm toward the Sioux and shouted over the noise of the herd, "Put them into the river!"

Poco lifted a hand in acknowledgement and his white smile flashed through the dust and sweat on his dark face. Poco thrived on excitement.

With the two riders blocking him on either flank, the dun steer plunged blindly across the valley and hit the Sioux in a sheet of mud and water and flying spray.

The Sioux River was not deep. Two feet on the average, and not over three in the deepest holes. But it was wide, at least two hundred yards from bank to bank.

For the first fifty yards the dun steer

maintained a stubborn, lunging gallop, and then the river began to win. Four inches of soft, river-bottom mud clung and sucked at his feet, making each lunge a thing of desperate labor. The wave of water against his breast was a constant, cloying drain on what little energy he had left. The gallop lapsed into an awkward, wallowing trot. With the slower gait some of the unreasoning panic left him, and by the time he reached the far bank he was traveling little faster than a walk. He scrambled up the muddy slope and found himself facing Will and Poco, sitting their horses some fifty yards ahead of him and waiting quietly.

The dun steers eyes were wild, but they were no longer blind with terror. His instinct was to break again into a run and he took several tentative steps forward, but the riders remained quietly blocking his way and he stopped and ran his nose along the ground and moaned. More cattle poured over the bank to join him. Leaderless, they bunched behind him in a restless, milling mass. For a moment the issue hung in the balance while the dun steer shook his head and moaned, and then Will started deliberately toward him and the dun steer turned back into the herd. The stampede was over.

Poco rode slowly over to Will, careful of any sudden movement that would give the nervous cattle another excuse to break loose. He said, "We still have the cows—if they do not drown in the river."

Will looked at the mass of cattle milling in the slow current. He said shortly, "They won't. Too shallow." Already the weight of the herd in the river was forcing the line to a halt on the bar bank. The tag end of the drag appeared and poured in among the others and the herd was a shifting, restless mass lying athwart the river.

On the far bank, Red Ryan sat his horse a hundred yards down river from the herd and Otey Mueller waited an equal distance on the up-river side. They made no attempt to control the cattle, knowing they were best left to quiet down and find their own way to the banks.

Will relaxed in the saddle and reached for his makings. He said, "Well, that should be the end of that. Time Greasy and Johnny get here with the ponies they should be settled down."

He proved to be a good prophet. The cattle gradually ceased their pointless milling and came to a stop. Presently they began drifting by twos and threes to the banks. They plodded tiredly through the mud to higher ground, and there a great weariness came upon them. By the time Greasy Tom and Johnny arrived with the horses, the herd was bunched loosely on both banks and many of them were lying down.

Getting them started again was exasperating work. They were sluggish and balked at crossing the river, stubbornly resisting all efforts to move them. It took two hours of hard and irritating labor before they were once more formed in line and plodding slowly up the valley of the Sioux.

Six hours later they filed through the gate into the fenced horse pasture at the Rafter J. The gate was closed behind them and the riders turned gratefully to the bunkhouse and the coffee Greasy Tom was already brewing in the kitchen.

Will posted no guard that night. The cattle were scattered loosely over the square mile of pasture, tired and stiff from their run, and he knew it would be impossible to get them started in the dark. The Rafter J crew turned in early, replete with the best meal they had eaten in days, and grateful for the comfort of familiar beds.

VII

MORNING brought a repitition of the exasperating work of starting the still lethargic cattle. But the riders were on fresh horses and went at their work with enthusiasm. Shortly after sun-up the herd was lined out on the last leg of its trip to the stockyards in Parade.

By midmorning the cattle had worked the stiffness out of their legs and moved along at a faster gait. At noon they topped the last rise and the little town of Parade lay spread out before them, a half mile away across the level river bottom. The stockyards were on the edge of town near the railroad tracks, and Will sent Poco ahead to open the gate and turn the point in when it arrived.

The cattle were spooky and suspicious of the unfamiliar surroundings, but they had grown accustomed to the discipline of the drive, and took out their nervousness in nothing more troublesome than a constant low moaning. Poco turned the point and the lead steers trotted through the gate. The rest of the herd followed in a long, unbroken line of bobbing backs and waving horns.

Will drew up at the gate beside Poco and watched the last of the line file through. He stepped down from the saddle and closed the gate. He looked up at Poco and suddenly grinned.

"Well, amigo, we cut it," Will said.

Poco waved a casual hand. "Ah, it is nothing. When the little cows know it is Poco Ramirez who follows, they say, 'what is the use' and come home."

Otey and Johnny and Red rode up beside Poco and drew rein. Otey gazed across the fence at the penned cattle and on his face was a look of relief and thankfulness and pleasure. Johnny took his cue from Poco and tried to look indifferent, a job at which he was not entirely successful. Red, as usual, betrayed nothing of what he felt.

Will said, "All right boys, that's the end of that piece of work. Any of you crave to wet down the dust, I reckon you know the way to town."

Red turned his horse without a word and started toward the main street of the little town. Otey and Johnny dropped in behind him. Poco waited until Will was mounted, and then he said innocently, "I suppose you will not have time for the drink because you will be too busy telling the small Mary how you have saved her."

Will felt the blood rise to his face and it came to him with a sort of detatched amazement that he was blushing. It didn't occur to him to wonder why. He said hastily, "Well of course I'll tell her if I see her, but mainly I've got to see Lloyd Wellman and tell him the cattle are in the—" It came to him that his quick explanation was only making it worse and he turned a suspicious glare on Poco and finished abruptly, "To hell with you! You suppose too damn much!"

Poco's eyes were innocently wide. He said, "But only the little time ago you told me I could make a fortune as the reader of minds."

Will said dryly, "Likely I forgot to mention you could get your hide hung on the fence doing the same thing."

Poco said slyly, "Well, I am not so lucky as to have the—ah—buyer waiting for me, so I will go to the bar of the Señor Fleer and drown the sadness of my heart in very bad whisky." Without giving Will a chance to reply, he whirled his horse and loped after Otey and Johnny.

Will started to ride after him and then pulled in his horse and swore under his breath. He paused a moment, undecided, and abruptly relaxed and grinned. He didn't doubt that Poco would go to Fleer's bar to do his drinking, it would be typical of his reckless notion of fun to do just that. But Poco was not a fool, and while some perverse demon in his makeup would derive a good deal of satisfaction out of drinking the defeated Fleer's liquor and watching the man's face, he was too experienced a hand to start any trouble in the enemie's camp. Will lifted his reins and turned his horse toward the Sutton Hotel.

MARY JORDAN was waiting for him on the long porch that fronted the building. She ran down the steps to meet him and was talking even before he dismounted.

"Oh Will, we heard you were coming in! I knew you would do it!"

He dropped his reins over the tie-rack and moved up beside her on the walk. He said half seriously, "You knew more than I did then. There were times I'd have sold out plumb cheap."

She laughed warmly and took his arm. "Ah, Will, you're far too modest. None of your friends doubted that you could do it."

Will said nothing as he escorted her back up the steps onto the porch. He was disturbingly conscious of the warm spot where her hand rested on his arm, and when he found her a chair and the hand was taken away the warm spot remained. He recalled Poco's parting words, and for some reason the memory had the power to make him ex-

tremely uneasy.

To make matters worse, she was regarding him with a strange look in her green eyes and a growing gleam of what looked suspiciously like amusement. He siezed upon the first thing that came to his mind and said, "You mentioned hearing we were coming in, how did that come about?"

"Why, a rider from the L 7 saw you crossing the south fork this morning. He told us about it," she answered.

"Us?" Will asked.

"Myself and a — friend."

The slight hesitation before and final word, and the modest dropping away of her eyes, was like a blow. Will had never been jealous of a girl before, and so did not recognize the violent emotion that swept over him. He was only aware of a savage desire to destroy something — preferably this worthless, underhanded friend. To his amazement he heard himself rasping, "I don't reckon it's any of my business who this 'friend' is?" His voice sounded as though it were full of sand, certainly no way to speak to a beautiful girl.

The beautiful girl didn't seem to mind. In fact she didn't even appear to notice. She looked up at him with wide, trusting, innocent eyes and said demurely, "Why of course, Will. It was Mr. Wellman."

The sudden relief left him feeling like a fool. He felt, vaguely, that he had been the victim of something, but he couldn't determine just what. He said inadequately, "Oh," and was silent.

Mary Jordan appeared to be enjoying herself. "Yes. We had a lovely talk, didn't he mention it?"

"No. Haven't seen him yet," Will answered.

"But—he said he was going to be at the yards."

Will was suddenly aware of a disturbing premonition. He knew that five minutes after the herd appeared the news would have spread all over the little town. He had been vaguely bothered by Wellman's failure to meet him at the corrals, but had brushed his uneasiness aside with the thought that Wellman was out of town or tied up elsewhere. Now, on hearing of the man's declared intention to meet him, the vague uneasiness became a conviction that something was wrong. There was no point in worrying his companion with nothing more definite than a suspicion.

"He's got a good many friends, likely he got to talking and forgot about it," he said easily.

A slight frown gathered between the girl's eyes. "That doesn't sound like Lloyd Wellman. Business comes first with him."

She had put words to the thing that was troubling him, but he smiled at her and said casually, "Always has. But any man ought to be able to ease up one time. Anyway, I'll drift down town and hunt him up. You sure he's not in his room?"

"I've been here on the porch since I left him. He couldn't possibly have come in without my knowing it."

With a carelessness he didn't feel he said, "I reckon I'll find him."

"I hope so, Will. And—hurry back!" she said, and watched him walk to his horse, step into the saddle and ride away down the street.

It did not take long for Will to determine that the man he sought was not down town. The little cattle buyer was a well-known character, and Will met a number of men who had seen him earlier in the day, but the man seemed to have disappeared into thin air shortly after he had been seen walking down the street with Mary Jordan.

Will emerged from the Gem Café, after receiving another negative answer to his questions, and paused on the board walk. Directly across the street was the town's only brick building, the Butte County Bank. His eyes hardened as he studied the building, and with sudden decision he crossed the street and pushed open the heavy front door.

THE front office of the bank was empty but for a thin faced clerk behind a brass grill. The clerk looked up expectantly at Will's entrance, and then lifted an ineffectual hand and said, "Hey!" as Will strode past him to a door at the back of the room.

A sign on the door said 'Private' in large gold letters, and below it, in smaller print,

'Ellis Kreh, President.' Will pushed the door open without knocking and walked in.

At the rear of the room, facing the door, was a desk. And behind the door sat a man. The man had been handsome in his youth, but that had been long ago, and time had not been kind to him. Hair that had once been luxuriant was now a thin gray fringe, left long and combed across in an attempt to cover the nakedness on top. The loss of teeth had brought the chin upward and inward, and what had been a bold, masculine nose was now a hooked beak pointing downward at the receding chin. Only his eyes were unchanged. Bright blue and undimmed by time, they remained direct and compelling.

He turned that blue gaze now on Will and said in a surprisingly deep voice, "Young man, did you ever consider knocking when you enter a private office?"

Will reached behind him with his foot and kicked the door shut. "All right Kreh, where is he?"

Far back in the blue eyes a brief light flickered and was instantly gone. Ellis Kreh said ponderously, "Mr. Christian, I'll try to have patience with you because you are young, but don't push me too far. Where is who?"

"Kreh, you called that note because you knew it couldn't be proven you'd agreed to extend it. You tried every trick you knew to stop that roundup, and when we pulled it off in spite of you, our buyer disappears two hours before we deliver the herd. Now, I didn't come here to play games. Where is he?"

The older man heard Will out with an odd expression growing on his face. For a long noment he was silent, and then he said in a queerly dead voice, "Lloyd Wellman has disappeared?"

With sudden insight Will thought, *He didn't know!* The knowledge was as unwelcome as it was unexpected, but it never occurred to him to doubt the truth of what he had seen in the other man's eyes—Ellis Kreh had not known that Wellman was missing.

All the worry and strain of the past ten days seemed to descend upon Will at once. He said in a tired voice, "All right, Kreh. Sorry I jumped the gun on that one. Reckon I'll go have a talk with your gambling friend, Darby Fleer."

An intense emotional conflict seemed to be going on behind the wreck that was Ellis Kreh's face. He said abruptly, "I never thought it would—" and stopped.

Will turned back from the door. "Never thought what, Kreh?"

For a moment the older man hesitated, undecided. And then he slumped tiredly in his chair. "Never mind, Christian. You'll probably find out soon enough." He lifted a listless hand in a weary gesture of dismissal and added, "You might as well get on with it, I have nothing more to say."

Will walked out of the office, past the indignant clerk, and into the street.

VIII

DARBY FLEER'S Buckhorn Bar was doing a good business. At least twenty men lined the long bar or sat at the tables against the wall. Will paused just within the door, his eyes sweeping the room for Darby Fleer. He didn't see the man he was seeking, but sitting alone at a table, his back to the wall and a bottle in front of him, was Poco Ramirez.

Will moved across the room and sat down at Poco's table. He said briefly, "Have you seen Fleer?"

Poco looked sad. "No, the Señor Fleer is not here to see me drink his bad whisky." His look saddened more. "I did not expect to see you so soon, my friend. Is it that the señorita does not believe the fine stories?"

Will said shortly, "Put a lid on it, Poco. Wellman's disappeared."

Instantly Poco was serious. "Ah, that is not good."

"It's worse than not good. If we don't find him it's the end-gate," Will said.

Poco stood up. "Then why do we wait? The señor in the bank will know."

Will said shortly, "Sit down!" His voice was harsh with a roughness of rising temper that surprised even himself. He saw the forming question in Poco's eyes and added more reasonably, "Sorry, Poco. No call to jump you. I've already seen Kreh. I'll lay

my last dollar he knows nothing about it."

Poco sat down again. "And so you look for Darby Fleer." He spoke casually, but his black eyes belied his tone.

Will shook his head. "I reckon there wouldn't be much point in talking to Fleer, but I'd like to see what he's got in the rooms upstairs."

Poco said doubtfully, "The Señor Fleer sells very bad whisky, but he is not a fool. If he has stolen the buyer of cows he would not keep him here."

"Could be he didn't have much choice," Will said. "Wellman was around town until a couple of hours ago. Fleer couldn't very well drag him out of town in the middle of the day, and Wellman wouldn't have gone willingly, knowing we were coming in with the herd. Fleer didn't have much time. He'd have to get Wellman out of sight first and wait until dark to get him out of town. The likely place to hold him would be in the rooms upstairs."

Poco nodded. "You are the smart man, my friend. We will look in the rooms upstairs."

Will stood up. "Correction, Poco. I'll look in the rooms upstairs. You'll stay here."

Poco too, got to his feet. He said pleasantly, "When I am taking care of the little cows I do the thing I am told. But when I am in town I do the thing Poco Ramirez thinks is good. I, too, am going up those stairs."

Will hesitated a moment and then yielded. He said, "All right, Poco. You can walk up, but if you have to be carried down, remember it was your own idea."

Poco smiled and came around the table and the two men started toward the stairs at the back of the room.

They were halfway across the room before one of the white-aproned bartenders noticed them. The man hesitated a moment, watching them, and as their destination became obvious, hurried toward a closed door near one end of the bar.

Will slowed his pace slightly and murmured, "Reckon I guessed right. We're about due to run into an argument."

The bartender went hurriedly through the door at the same moment that Will and Poco reached the stairs. Poco took two steps up before Will's voice stopped him. Will said quietly, "Hold it Poco. Might as well settle it now as later."

He had hardly finished speaking when the bartender reappeared in the doorway with Darby Fleer and another man.

The second man was a stranger to Will, but his calling was as obvious as the two heavy guns strapped low against his thighs. It showed in his bright, restless eyes, and the instinctive manner in which he moved several steps away from Darby Fleer, forcing a split in the target in the event there should be a fight. He was a small man, but the two guns he carried reduced all men to a common size.

DARBY FLEER moved away from the door and around the end of the bar and stopped. The little gunman kept pace with him, slightly behind and well clear to one side. The bartender hurried along behind the bar to the opposite end, his expression almost comical in his relief at getting safely away from the danger zone.

Fleer's voice was as cold as his pale eyes. "The rooms upstairs are private, Christian. You and your friend will stay down here!" The sound of his voice was like a whiplash across the room, instantly stilling every sound.

Will turned slowly to face the two men at the end of the bar. "Got something up there you don't want seen, Fleer?" he said.

Fleer said coldly, "My reasons are my own, and no business of yours. I'd advise you to attend to your own job and keep your meddlesome nose out of my affairs!"

"Well, now, Fleer, I reckon that's what I'm doing—tending to my job. I've got a herd of Rafter J cows to sell, and I reckon the man that wants to buy them is upstairs. At any rate I aim to find out."

The swarthy bar owner's face turned a sickly yellow with the force of his emotions. His body crouched slightly forward and his hand was a hooked claw above the butt of his single gun.

His usually cultured voice had a rasp in it that matched the blazing anger in his eyes. "By God, don't try throwing your

weight around in here, Christian! Save that for your so called 'job' on that woman-run spread you work for! A hell of a hard job it is, too, I hear—keeps you working nights as well as days!"

Until that moment Will would have done all he could, short of abandoning his search, to avoid a gun fight. But with the passing of Fleer's final insult a wave of savage fury swept over him that was almost nauseating. He paused for a long moment before he trusted himself to speak, and even then his voice was slightly unsteady with suppressed violence.

"You're lying in your teeth, Fleer, and you're going to die for it!" The big room hung suspended in breathless silence, and across it his voice added with controlled deadliness, "Now draw, damn you, or I'll cut you down where you stand!"

For a brief instant a fleeting doubt appeared in Darby Fleer's pale eyes. He was a top hand with a Colt himself, and he knew the abilities of the gunman who sided him. But he knew, too, the reputation of the man that faced him, and for a moment his nerve almost failed him. If there had been no witnesses to the act he may have tried to avoid a showdown, but with the roomful of men silently watching him his pride would permit no retreat. His eyes flicked briefly to the gunman beside him and back to Will.

Abruptly he screamed, "Take him!" and his hand plunged downward for his gun.

Darby Fleer's brief moment of indecision had given Will time to recover somewhat from the blazing anger that shook him. Almost without thinking about it, he realized that the hired gunman was the more dangerous of his two opponents. The man was unaffected emotionally, and therefore less likely to fumble or miss.

Will saw the decision in Fleer's eyes an instant before the man went for his gun, and his own hand struck downward only a split second behind the dark bar owner. The little gunman made his move at the same instant, a two-handed bid with the speed of a striking snake.

Will's draw was an unmeasurable fraction of time faster than the other two. He saw the twin Colts of the little gunman sweeping up in a blur of speed, and his own gun bucked and smashed back against his palm in thunderous recoil.

A tiny jet of dust spurted from the left breast of the gunman's shirt and his body jerked under the impact. His thumbs slipped from the hammers of the two guns and added their shattering roar to the blast of Will's gun.

Will could not spare the time to observe the effect of his fire. His thumb caught the Colt's hammer at the peak of the recoil and he was twisting to bring the gun to bear on Fleer even before the little gunman had started to fall.

In the roaring echoes within the confining walls he did not hear Darby Fleer fire, but he saw the black-shot orange blossom of flame at the muzzle of Fleer's gun and felt the numbing, burning path of the bullet across left his ribs. His own gun thundered its flaming answer and Fleer dropped his Colt and staggered back against the bar.

For a moment Fleer remained erect, his back braced against the bar and his right hand clapsed against the middle of his chest. He took the hand away and stared with dull, uncomprehending at the blood that smeared the palm. Abruptly he sighed and bent forward at the waist and fell face down on the rough floor. A long shudder convulsed his body, and then the tremor passed and he was completely still.

IX

WILL stood at the foot of the stairs looking at the two men sprawled on the floor. The sudden cessation of violence and anger and the bloody climax left him feeling slightly sick. He was vaguely aware of a burning sensation from the flesh wound along his ribs as the numbness wore off and feeling returned. The big room was as silent as the grave, the watching men seeming scarcely to breath.

Across the silence Poco's voice came gravely, "You are the fast man, my friend. I have the gun only halfway out and it is all over."

Will glanced at him. "Yes," he said and

turned back to the two men. He drew a deep breath in an effort to shake off the inertia that gripped him. It came to him that he still had his gun in his hand, and he was pushing it back into the holster when he was brought violently out of his apathy by the blast of Poco's Colt. He twisted around with the agility of a mountain lion, the gun once more in his hand and his body instinctively braced.

Poco was facing the top of the stairs. A whisp of smoke drifted from the muzzle of his .45 and the gun was poised for another shot.

At the head of the stairs a man sprawled with one arm hanging over the first step. A bubble of red froth broke at the corner of the man's mouth and trickled down his chin, but his head was up and the hand that hung over the step held a gun. The hand was coming up slowly, raising the heavy gun with a terrible deliberation, and the hammer was eared back.

Poco said almost gently, "*Un poco mas,*" and shot the man between the eyes.

The indrawn breath of the watching crowd was a gusty sigh that only accented the following silence.

Poco calmly shucked the empty shell out of his gun and replaced it with a live one. He said conversationally, "It was not polite of this man to try to shoot from the back."

Will looked from Poco's unconcerned face to the dead man at the head of the stairs and back at Poco.

He said dryly, "It was also damn poor judgement," and moved past Poco up the stairs, his gun still ready in his hand. "Let's get on with it, Poco. If Wellman isn't up there we're going to need all the time we can get to beat the law to the badlands."

They found Lloyd Wellman in the second room they looked into. The room was furnished with only a bed and a broken down bureau and two straight-backed chairs. Wellman was on the bed, his feet lashed securely to the footboard and his hands spread wide over his head and tied to the ornamental iron work that formed the head. He was effectively gagged, but his eyes were open.

Will and Poco cut him loose and pulled the gag from his mouth and sat him up on the edge of the bed. He tried indignantly to stand up, but his feet were numb from the tight binding and he collapsed on the floor and had to be helped again to the bed.

He swore and rubbed his hands together to bring the feeling back to them. "Give me your gun, Will!" he said violently. "I'm going to go down and shoot Fleer right in the middle of the belly!"

"Won't be necessary, Lloyd. He's got his," Will answered quietly.

Wellman looked up at him quickly. "Is that what all the commotion was about a few minutes ago?"

Will nodded. "Him and a couple of his hard-case friends." He was silent a moment, then added, "How did they pull you in, Lloyd?"

The little buyer looked down at the floor. He seemed embarrassed. "I never felt like such a fool in my life. I was passing out front a couple of hours ago and Fleer stopped me. Asked me to do him a favor. Said he had a lawyer up here with a will, and he

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GOAT NOTE

by S. OMAR BARKER

Mary had a nanny goat.
Its habits made her mutter,
For when she turned to milk the goat,
It turned, in turn, to butter!

---

wanted me to sign as a witness. Said it would only take a minute."

Wellman paused, and when neither Will nor Poco spoke, he added defensively, "I didn't have any reason to suspect him! We came upstairs and he opened the door for me and I walked in and the roof fell on me. I woke up tied to this bed."

"Do you know why?" Will asked.

WELLMAN said violently, "Hell, yes, I know why! Because Fleer owned the mortgage on the Rafter J and didn't want it paid off. He wanted the place. He murdered old John Jordan to get it, figuring the girl wouldn't be able to cut it."

"He told you that?" Will said doubtfully.

"Told me, hell!" the little man said explosively. "He sat there laughing on the foot of the bed and bragged about it!"

Poco asked softly, "Did the man of the bank, this Kreh, know that he had killed the Señor John?"

"No," Wellman said. "No, Kreh liked to gamble — on the quiet — and Fleer got into him deep. Fleer held some big I O U's that Kreh couldn't meet, and he threatened to make them public if Kreh didn't settle. Kreh knew he was through as a banker if people found out he'd been gambling over his head. He finally signed over the papers on the Rafter J to settle up. He must have been suspicious of something when old John was killed, because he jumped Fleer about it. Fleer denied it, knowing Kreh would balk at murder."

"It was still the bad trick, trying to take the home from the small Miss Mary," Poco said.

Wellman tried to stand again and found that this time his feet would support him. "Kreh didn't know Fleer meant to forclose. He thought all Fleer wanted was his money —until he was in too deep to back out. Fleer got quite a kick out of telling me how he'd drawn the wool over Kreh's eyes."

Will was looking at the little man curiously. He wondered if Wellman realized how close he had been to death. He said dryly, "I reckon you know Fleer never figured you'd live long enough to repeat what he'd said."

"What in hell do you suppose I've been laying there thinking about for the past two hours? Only thing I don't understand is why he didn't cut my throat to start with," the little buyer said.

Poco said cheerfully, "Maybe he does not want your blood all over the nice bed. Maybe he thinks it will be easier to walk you out tonight than to carry you out." He thought a moment, and added more seriously, "And maybe it is because he wants someone to listen to the story of the smart man he is."

"I'll take the last one, Poco," Will said. He turned toward the door. "Well, we might as well go down and see if the law has showed up yet."

For the first time, Poco saw the wet red stain on Will's shirt as he turned. "My friend, you have the wound." he said quietly.

Will forestalled the immediate, startled question that leaped into Wellman's eyes. He said quickly. "Lost a little hide along my ribs. It'll keep 'til I—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of the law he had just mentioned, in the person of Sam Caldwell, sheriff of Butte County.

Sheriff Caldwell came through the door with his gun in his hand, backed by several reluctant townsmen who didn't seem too happy with their assignment.

"Now look here, Christian," he said. "What's all this—" he broke off at sight of Lloyd Wellman. "Lloyd! What're you doing here?"

"Why Sam, I was just thanking these here boys for busting Fleer before he got around to cutting my throat. You got any objections?" The surprised sheriff didn't answer immediately, and Wellman added, "It's a long story, Sam, and Christian's got a hole in him. So you just set down here comfortable and I'll tell you about it while he goes and gets patched up."

Sheriff Caldwell said explosively, "Not by a damn sight! Them boys just shot three of this town's citizens, and they ain't getting out of my sight 'til I find out how it happened!"

"Ah, cut it off, Sam." Wellman said wearily. "Those two hired gunmen weren't citizens of yours. And Fleer was a murder-

er. He told me so himself. He had me picked for his next customer. Now, you want me to tell you about it? Or do you want Will to stand there and bleed all over the floor?"

Sam Caldwell grumbled, but he acquiesced. He had known Lloyd Wellman for years, and he knew the man's honesty was beyond question. He motioned Will toward the door and nodded to Poco. "You go with him—see he gets there in one piece."

WILL knew his wound was neither serious or in need of immediate attention. But he knew too, how fast word of the gun fight would spread over the little town, and he wanted to get to Mary Jordan and reassure her. He went quietly out of the room with Poco following.

Fleer and the two gunmen still lay where they had fallen. The crowd in the bar watched curiously and in silence as Will and Poco walked down the stairs and through the bar and out of the batwing doors.

On the boardwalk Poco laid a hand on Will's arm and stopped. He said, "I do not think I will have to go with you any more."

Will looked at him and grinned. "I'll likely bleed to death on the way, but I reckon maybe I'll manage to crawl along."

"If you are in the bed for a long time with this bad wound, you would have the very pretty nurse," Poco said.

For some reason the insinuation did not confuse Will as it had only a short time before. He said pleasantly, "You can go to hell, Poco."

"Ah, well—then if you will not have the nurse, do not change the shirt with the blood before you see her. And she will see you have bled and she will say 'ah, you have almost die for me' and faint in your arm." Poco paused and added earnestly, "Believe me, my friend, I have the *sabe* in the things of this kind."

Will laughed at him, and said, "That suggestion I made a minute ago still stands." He started to turn away, a thought came to him and he hesitated and turned back. "Poco, that—that deal about the shirt. You really think it might turn the trick?"

Poco said gravely, "There is no doubt, my good friend."

"Well —" Will said, and paused. "Well, I might try it," and abruptly turned away and started down the street toward the Sutton Hotel.

The wound in his side was like a hot iron laid along his ribs and he had not eaten since before dawn and his body was worn out by two weeks of terrific labor. But he had never felt better in his life. He felt nine feet tall and his boots seemed scarcely to touch the boardwalk. He thought of the news he had to tell May and walked faster. He thought of Poco's advice on her reaction to that news and almost broke into a run.

Poco stood in front of the Buckhorn Bar and watched his friend hurry down the street. His brilliant dark eyes had a soft light that his enemies would never see, for he was a Latin and he was thinking of love. He sighed and turned back into the bar for a long delayed drink of the late Señor Fleer's very bad whisky.

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Boothill Blonde

A Novel By W. J. Reynolds

Beautiful, rich and hard as nails, she had already cost Tom Bolling everything he owned—and now she would probably cost him his life

SHANKS stopped the big freight wagon, twisted in the saddle of the wheel horse to look at his passenger perched on the tarp covered load.

"You'd better hop off, stranger. My boss ain't inclined towards bigheartedness. I'm liable to get fired for hauling no-pay freight!"

Tom Bolling promptly tossed his bedroll down, and climbed over the big wheel to the ground.

"I'm obliged to you," he said in his soft voice. "I hope you don't get in trouble on my account. You should have let me off sooner."

They were just short of the business part of Los Alamos, among the first residential homes.

RESTAURANT

Shanks grinned, his seamed face friendly. "Had trouble for nigh sixty years, little more won't hurt, I reckon. But we can take a mite of caution."

"Your boss is tough, eh?"

Shanks nodded. "The boss is ice and dollar signs under that pretty covering of female come-hitherness. Got some right smart tough eggs working for her too."

"Her? Your boss is a woman?" Tom Bolling shot a sharp glance at the big letters on the side of the wagon. Understanding broke in his face, and a wickedness grew in his gray eyes.

Shanks regarded him with more interest, sharpness in his own faded eyes. "Yep. Janice Wyatt. With the help of Crider, a gunman, Jessup, her bruiser manager, and the yelping of Cameron, the marshal, she's done right well. She owns this town stranger, so don't make any mistakes and get Janice Wyatt mad at you."

"I'd get jailed, eh?"

Shanks snorted. "Maybe if she was irritated. Otherwise you wouldn't live fifteen minutes. If she was real mad, that is." A sudden guarded expression blanked Shanks's face. "Or maybe you were hunting a job with this outfit?" His glance ran to the belted Colt at Tom Bolling's waist.

"No worry there, old timer. What does this woman look like? How long has she been here?"

Shanks withdrew into himself then, his face tight. "Old men talk too damn much," he said. "See you, stranger." He flicked the jerkline, and yelled, "Hayrrr! Hiiii!" The wagon ground forward.

Tom Bolling picked up his bedroll, then stood there at the beginning of the street looking after the wagon. The big letters stood out boldly on its side. JANCO FREIGHT LINES.

Could be, Tom Bolling thought, his lean, hard planed face setting in granite lines, the wicked light growing again in his gray eyes. Janice Hughes, in the short time that Tom Bolling had known her and her husband, Ray Hughes, was always saying Janice and Company. JANCO. It fitted.

A bullet had gone in the back of Ray Hughes's head back in Texas. It had been a .38, and that was all that had saved Tom Bolling from getting his neck stretched despite his alibi. Janice had been through with Ray Hughes, probably he wasn't even her husband. She'd shot him and rode away with twelve thousand dollars, leaving Tom Bolling to explain why his T Bar horses were ridden by the two holdup men. And why Ray Hughes's body was found a mile from his ranchhouse.

Tom Bolling walked on down the street, toward the main part of Los Alamos, his boots kicking up spurts of yellow dust. His face was grim, stubborn, the same stubborness that had made him fight that holdup charge in Texas to the last ditch. In three years of court fighting, it had cost him every cent he had. He was now thirty, his hard labors had gone into his ranch which was starting to shape up—but now it was gone. Gone because a greedy murderess wanted a fast dollar and left him holding the bag. His only guilt was taking in Ray Hughes and his wife, Janice, both half starved and sick when they drove up to his place one night in a wagon falling to pieces. Well, he had sure as hell paid for that hospitality!

Los Alamos looked to be a prosperous town. People were moving purposefully, ore wagons ground up the dust to powder fineness, smaller rigs moved through the pall of dust. Tom Bolling passed a livery and feed, blacksmith, and a hardware store. The stores were a solid line down both sides, interspersed liberally with saloons. But the real shantytown appeared to be farther down on the end of the street. Even from here Tom Bolling could see two drunks fighting, mostly swinging and falling, while others staggered around them bawling encouragement or partisan curses. Other men walked around the fight, ignoring it.

Tom Bolling paused in the street, then stepped up on the walk to avoid the laden ore wagon's dust. He was hungry, and fingered the two silver dollars in his pocket in silent debate. He'd have to get a job if he stayed here, or even if he didn't. But he had to eat, his belly rumbling protest for the missed meals since last night.

A sign two doors down said MEALS.

One dollar. He was turning that way when a man blocked his way. Bolling looked up, meeting the stare from a pair of hard blue eyes, eyes set shallowly in his skull, giving them a peculiar flatness. He wore a pair of six-shooters and a marshal's badge.

"Have you got a job lined up, mister?" the marshal asked bluntly, insultingly. "We don't welcome bums in this town. Get a job or get out." His grin was hard. "But in this case you got a job."

"All right," Tom Bolling said amiably. "I can use one."

"Report to the Janco Freight Line stables. Tell Jessup that Nat Cameron sent you."

"Good. It's a big outfit, I hear."

"Big enough. Move along."

TOM BOLLING moved away, not looking back. But he was aware that the marshal was looking after him, seemingly disappointed that Tom Bolling had been so amiable.

A real tough one, Bolling thought, in his own opinion. But how tough when the chips are down? He'd wanted to throw his weight around just now, to bully a man he thought was down and out. Nat Cameron would be a man to watch, to keep clear of unless a man wanted trouble.

"Hey! You, bum!" the marshal's voice cracked at Tom Bolling.

Tom was just entering the restaurant. He stopped, turning to face the marshal as he strode up to him. "Yeah, Marshal?"

Cameron's flat stare was wicked, shining peculiarly. He was about to enjoy this. "I told you to report to Janco, not start bumming grub. Now get going before I rap you over the head with a pistol!"

"A man has to eat to work," Tom Bolling said. "I ain't had any grub since last night. I pay for what I eat." He kept his level stare on the flat tyes, and now his own anger began to show. "I'll eat first, mister."

"You wouldn't have an idea of ducking out, would you, bum?"

So, the marshal didn't like it to come back straight. "I'll eat first," Tom Bolling said. "Then what if I do decide to move along?"

Cameron's grin was nasty. "Then you go in the clink, and you can work out your fine at two-bits a day, instead of the fifty cents you'll get as is!"

Tom looked at the dollar meal sign. "I figure wages are better than that. The mines pay five dollars a day."

"You'll work at Janco. You be there in thirty minutes—or else." He wheeled, striding away, his twin guns bumping his legs.

Tom Bolling walked into the restaurant.

At this time of day, shortly past noon, there were only three other customers. A woman was behind the counter. She was young and wore a starched blue dress with white trim, her auburn hair was tied back with a blue ribbon. The inside of the place was neat as the woman. As Tom chose a stool and sat down, she set cutlery before him and a glass of water.

She nodded to the menu printed on the back counter. "Everything's listed there, stranger. Except the trout, it's gone." Her voice was strong, without loudness, her smile pleasant.

"I'll take the plate with roast beef," he said.

She relayed his order to the kitchen, then went to the cash box to make change for the three men leaving. As she carried the dishes to the kitchen, she kept glancing at Tom, and twice he thought she was going to speak.

Finally, as she set his order in front of him, she said, "Are you job hunting?"

He nodded. "I had that idea. It seems though, according to the town marshal, that I've already got one."

Her blue eyes became suddenly cold, but Tom knew the coldness was not directed at him. "I thought so. Janco, I suppose?"

"Yes. Seems like fifty cents a day isn't much."

"That's board too," she said. "If you call a bed in the stables and two bowls of slop board. It's that or jail. Stranger, I'd advise some fast traveling."

"How big an outfit is Janco?"

"Big enough. About thirty wagons, a warehouse, mining property. They control the town. The merchants are finding it harder and harder to get anything hauled except by Janco. They buy from Janco's

warehouse, wholesale house, or something happens. My boss buys from them, and for that two-bit meal you pay a dollar. That will give you the idea."

"How do they get away with it?"

"People let things get out of control." She shrugged. "Then there's the marshal, Cameron. He's Janice's man, and so are Crider, another gunman, and Jessup, the bruiser boss. They can get more if they need them. My advise is for you to get out of here, mister."

"I hope Shanks don't get into trouble for letting me ride in with him."

She looked at him sharply. "You rode in with Shanks?" When he nodded, she said, "He should know better. He'll lose his job if Jessup gets wind of it, maybe his face stamped in to boot. You too, stranger. You can hurry down there and get a job and take a cussing and maybe some slapping around and a week's dock of pay."

"And if I don't?"

"Besides Cameron, you'll have Jessup looking for you. He'll half kill you, or worse. He loves the sight of other people's blood. He won't miss an opportunity like this."

"Hasn't he ever been stamped himself?"

"I've never heard of it. But if he was then there's Crider." Her angry eyes softened a little. "Stranger, Doc Noah is driving into Globe. You light out and hide along the road, and I'll tell him to pick you up. It's your only chance."

"Thank you, ma'am but I reckon I'll stick around. I'd like to meet this Janice or Janco!"

"Mister, you won't be able to see her by the time she gets to you!"

A man came in, sat down on a stool. "Just coffee, Kathy," he said. "I need something to take the taste of Jessup out of my mouth."

"What's he done now?" Kathy asked as she poured him coffee.

"He knocked old Shanks down, kicked him, then fired him. Some rat ran to Jessup and told him Shanks had given somebody a ride. He's hunting the fellow now. He didn't get enough blood from Shanks."

Kathy shot Tom Bolling a quick glance. "Stranger, you can go back into the kitchen."

"Thanks, ma'am. What'll Shanks do now?"

They were both staring at Tom Bolling. Kathy said, "Shanks has a small place north of town, in the hills. He has a few cattle, and was working to get money to import a blooded bull to build up his herd. He'll make out, but that won't help you."

"She's right, stranger," the man said. "If you rode in with Shanks, you'd best make some tracks."

Tom Bolling got up and laid down his dollar. "I'm right much obliged to you folks," he said and walked out.

II

HE LEANED on the porch, waiting, and almost at once he saw a hulking man walking down the street. His great shaggy head looking like a splashed patch of blood. He wheeled suddenly, speaking to a man in a doorway, and Tom Bolling saw the lettering over the door; MARSHAL'S OFFICE. They spoke together, then Cameron nodded toward Tom Bolling, and the other wheeled, staring across and up the street at Tom.

Cameron's grin was wide as he turned back into his office. The big redhead lunged into the street, coming straight toward Tom Bolling. Tom watched him alertly, noting the deceptive clumsiness of the big man. He wasn't clumsy at all but moved in a peculiar sliding shuffle which was fast and power packed. He'd be a mean man to tangle with. He also wore heavy, flat heeled boots with thick leather soles. The man in the café had said Jessup had kicked Shanks, and Tom knew he was a mean and dirty fighter who liked blood.

Tom Bolling felt his own wicked temper rising, and remembered he was thirty years old and flat broke. He was a man who had had few pleasures, who had worked like a horse to start his own spread. It was gone now, and here was the sadist boss to the woman who had done it. The kind of men she would have to satisfy her own liking for blood.

We'll see, Tom Bolling thought, we'll see.

Jessup stopped in front of Tom Bolling,

"Hello, darling," Janice said, her fingers tight on the triggers of the shotgun

Indian black eyes, opaque and glittery, regarding Tom with a malevolent pleasure. "Are you the bum that rode in on a Janco wagon?"

"That's me," Tom said.

Jessup struck, driving in swiftly with the full power of bull shoulders and corded arms. Even expecting it, Tom was almost caught, unable to avoid the blow but not receiving all its power. Jessup's fist slammed into his face, putting Tom hard against the porch post, half his face going numb. His head glanced off the post, his ear feeling as though it was torn off. The post broke, a jagged splinter tearing Tom's shirt, gouging flesh.

Jessup leaped in, driving a second and third blow. Tom was already going back and the blows were short but still they hurt.

"I'm gonna stomp your guts out, you damn tramp!" Jessup yelled.

Tom bounced off the wall, gasping for breath the post had driven from him. He rolled with Jessup's attack, getting his feet under him again. Then he was standing up to Jessup, meeting the savage attack, blow for blow, feeling the solid smack of his own fists on flesh.

A wild fury comsumed Tom Bolling, a fury bottled for three years, and he went into Jessup savagely, driving solid blows into that red face, into the hard flesh. Jessup gave ground, more in surprise than hurt.

Then Tom connected a clubbing blow with Jessup's rib cage under his heart and saw Jessup's eyes pop, Tom sent another into

that red face and felt flesh give under his fist. He saw lips split and splatter blood, felt the give as teeth gave way.

Jessup bawled in rage and hurt, and flung a huge boot at Tom's groin. Tom let the boot go by then grabbed it and upended the Janco boss with its leverage.

Jessup hit the ground jarringly, and Tom went on top of him with doubled knees. Jessup's cry was an explosive grunt as the knees hit him in the belly. Tom, off balance, fell to one side, and Jessup with legs drawn up from the belly blow, drove both boots into Tom, one numbing his hip, the other hit his belly and exploded his own breath out. Jessup threw himself at Tom, and Tom rose to meet the lunge bluntly, the shock of the collision knocking them both down and apart.

Jessup wheeled his body to send a boot at Tom's face, and again Tom caught the boot, twisting it with all his remaining strength. Jessup bawled with pain, but Tom knew he didn't have enough strength to break the leg. He released it, but gave himself a start to his feet by pulling on it, delaying Jessup's rise.

Jessup came up full into the roundhouse blow of Tom's fist, and the solid blow measured Jessup in the dust, left him hanging there on wide braced hands, gagging for breath. Tom stood a moment, sucking in great lungfuls of air, then he measured Jessup with his eyes, swung a boot with all the power he had left and felt the toe sink into Jessup's belly, lifting the man then letting him fall flat and limp.

Tom Bolling sagged back to brace against the hitchrail, sucking in air, gathering strength. He slowly became aware of the crowd that had materilized around them. Townsmen, cowboys, miners, businessmen. They were all looking from Tom Bolling to Jessup, mouths slack in amazement, many of them were starting to grin.

Then the grins instantly disappeared as Nat Cameron came shoving through the group. He stopped, stared at Jessup then at Tom Bolling, his flat eyes guarded.

A man stepped up, handing Tom his pistol that had fallen out of its holster.

"Here, stranger, reckon this is yours. I wiped it clean so its ready to use if you need it, and you likely will in a minute!" It was old Shanks, his face swollen out of shape, but his eyes gleaming happily. "I'll just go on record before all these brave folks, and say this is a proud day that I seen Jessup get his comeuppance!"

"I'm obliged," Tom gasped. He holstered his gun. He looked at the marshal. "Jessup jumped me as you know. You pointed me out, didn't you, Marshal, then watched through the window to see me beat to death."

"You come over to my office," Cameron said. "You'll have to see the judge. Disturbing the peace."

Tom's breathing was easier now. "About that job, Cameron, I don't think I'll take it, not for fifty cents a day. You want to argue the matter?"

"You're under arrest, mister!"

Easy, Bolling told himself, get hold of your temper. You kill this fool and you're an outaw.

"I'll go along, marshal, but I don't see any wrong in defending myself. Not after you sicced him on me."

"Give me that gun!"

Tom Bolling met Cameron's stare bluntly. "I said I'd go along, Cameron. I'll keep the gun just in case you get any more ideas."

"You going to make me take it, mister?"

"I won't make you, but you can try. That's the only way you'll get it."

TOM BOLLING stood easily now, regretting his temper but standing fast. A man could only take so much. He noted the way Cameron's eyes changed, smeared then slid away.

Why he's going to back down, Tom Bolling thought. He's yellow!

"Need some help, Nat?" a hard voice drawled. "This is a tough one, eh? Better deputize me to help you."

That voice came from Tom's right, down the sidewalk some ten feet. He was caught, not daring to take his eyes off Cameron. He saw Cameron's face go slack with relief, sweat pop out on his face, and an unholy rage crawled into him.

"Burn him down, Crider!" Cameron said.

"Unless he drops that gun."

"A real pleasure, sir," Crider said. "What'll it be, mister?"

"Better do it, stranger," Kathy's clear voice came from the restaurant door behind Tom. "Either one of them will be happy to murder you."

"All right," Tom Bolling said. He eased his left hand down to unbuckle his gunbelt, letting it drop to the ground.

"Get over to jail!" Cameron said. He circled, as Tom stepped forward, and picked up the gunbelt. He followed Tom across and down the street towards the marshal's office and jail.

Then Tom stopped as Kathy's clear voice said angrily, "Pistol whip him in your usual way, Cameron, before you lock him up." Kathy had stepped out on the porch, and the milling men had all stopped, looking at her, some of them looking scared, others stiff faced. "Maybe Janice will raise your pay—or sleep with you!"

Cameron had turned, his face red with rage. Crider, a lean slat of a man was stopped too. He said, "Sometime, missy, you're going to flap that long tongue once too often."

Kathy turned her stare on the gunman. "What'll you do, Crider? Shoot me in the back, like you did my father? You and that jackass that's called the town marshal? Go ahead, Crider, shoot me now. Maybe that will stir up these spineless clods who call themselves men enough to help a real man. A man who just whipped one of Janco's murderers and bully boys. Go ahead, Crider, you back shooting dog!"

A subtle change came over the crowd, a growing anger, a feeling that could not be seen. But Tom Bolling could feel it and so could Crider and Nat Cameron.

Crider took quick action, the only thing he could do. "All right, break it up," he yelled at the men. He turned his suddenly burning eyes, on them, singling them out, and saw them start moving. The crowd faded quickly, but there was more than one outraged look.

Crider wheeled on Kathy. "Get back inside." His voice went low, vicious. "Get in there, or I'll call on you and use a gun-barrel on that face."

Kathy wordlessly turned back into the cafe. Cameron wheeled on Tom Bolling. "Get, damn you, before I beat your head in!"

Tom started again, entered the office and waited. He was sure he could thank Kathy for saving him a beating with a pistol barrel. Unless Cameron was even more stupid than he seemed, he would not dare do more than curse and threaten. The change had come into the men quickly out there, too quickly for the safety of Janco. Men were becoming aroused, which meant that Janco was going too far and people were fed up—almost to the point of violence.

There were three cells in the town jail. Five men were in two of them, four of them drunk, sleeping, the fifth scowling at Tom Bolling. He turned to face Cameron.

"Marshal, that crowd out there don't like you. They evidently don't like Janco. You'd better drop this before it's too late. Your Janice woman, to make the splash she has, could not be stupid. She'll have your hide if you blow her playhouse up."

The desire to murder was in Cameron's eyes, his flat stare vicious but harboring fear too. Tom Bolling had judged the situation correctly. Cameron wanted to beat him to death, he'd never forget that challenge out there where he had backed down. But he dared not move until he could get his orders from Janice Wyatt.

"Get in that empty cell before I cave your head in," Cameron said. "We got a nice hot canyon here, and busting rock up there for a month will take some of the sass out of you."

"I'll pay his fine. How much is it?" Both Tom and Cameron turned to see Kathy standing in the doorway. "Twenty-five dollars is a disturbing the peace fine, isn't it, little boy?" She was looking at Cameron.

Cameron's face was red, his rage nearly uncontrollable thing. "Get out of here! By God, I've had about all I can stand out of you!"

"I had more than enough of you a long time ago, Cameron," she said calmly. "My father was shot, his store burned by Janco's men, such as you, because he wouldn't bow

down to them. What's the fine?"

"The judge will set it," Cameron answered. "Tomorrow."

Heels rapped the board walk and another woman came in. She was a tall woman, with blonde hair in shining ringlets, blue eyes wide and innocent in a smooth face that was breathtakingly beautiful.

"What's going on here? Nat, what kind of stupid thing have you done now?" Janice asked, in a husky, gentle voice. "Never mind. Crider told me. Put that bum on a wagon and send him out of here. Now."

"Are you scared, you hellcat?" Kathy asked. "He's the only real man in town, let's keep him!"

Janice gave Kathy a wide eyed look. "Dear, you're such a talker. I must do something about you, I see that. I should have done it already."

"You've changed your name, Janice," Tom Bolling drawled. "Have you married again?"

III

FOR the first time Janice looked at Tom Bolling. Her first hurried glance had not penetrated the swollen face, the blood and dust and sweat. Now she stared at Tom, her eyes widening. Slowly a lovely smile parted her lips. "Tom! Tom Bolling!"

"That's right, Janice."

"Tom. Why didn't someone tell me your name?" Looking at Nat she said, "Tom is an old friend!" She moved up quickly to Tom, caught his arms then pulled his head down to kiss him on the mouth, seemingly not noticing the blood and dirt. "Tom, darling, I'm terribly glad to see you." She whirled on the gaping Cameron, and stockstill Kathy. "Give Tom his gun at once, Nat. You idiot! Tom will come with me to the house, get cleaned up. Nothing I have it too good for Tom Bolling."

Tom, his face wooden, buckled on his gun. Kathy whirled and ran out of the office. Janice giggled. "Your lady defender is angry with you, Tom. I wonder why?"

Tom gave Janice a meager grin. "You know why, Janice."

"Tom, what are you doing out here in Arizona? But never mind that now, you can tell me after you clean up? Where's your horse?"

"A rattler got him in New Mexico," Tom said. "I was too broke to buy another."

"I'll see you have the best horse in Los Alamos. And anything else you want." She moved up beside Tom, taking his arm, pressing it against her. She smiled up at him, her eyes tender. "Tom, I'm so happy to see you!"

Leaving the glowering, still stunned marshal, they went out. A shiny surrey with tasseled top, and pulled by matched blacks stood at the curb. Tom Bolling assisted Janice to the seat then climbed in, taking the lines at her nod.

"I'm on the west end of town, Tom," she said. "I have temporary quarters at the office, until I get a house built. I haven't been sure that I wanted to build here."

She kept up a running fire of talk, light talk, trival incidents while her eyes softly caressed his face, her arm linked with his, smiling up at him.

She's some woman, Tom Bolling thought in reluctant admiration. She hides her real self well, yet I know she's guilty as hell. He had no idea how many men she had sent to their deaths, but he knew that she had personally shot Ray Hughes. He had no proof, but he knew it.

Ray Hughes had been found the day after the robbery, shot dead. No one had known Ray and Janice had been staying at Tom Bolling's ranch. The sheriff knew they were there after finding the wagon, but figured only for an overnight stop. That and the failure to find a .38 pistol together with Tom Bolling's proved whereabouts at the time of the robbery had been the point that saved him from the pen or gallows. Then it had cost him his ranch.

Janice had been devilish clever. She hadn't made it obvious or too plain, but had arranged it so Tom would be suspected and likely convicted. It had been close. While Janice fled with twelve thousand dollars in cash.

And one of Tom Bollings best horses.

He brought his attention back to Janice, hearing her say, "What do you think of it, Tom?"

They were approaching the Janco yards, a huge sprawling barn with a maze of corrals. Beyond that a hundred yards was another huge building, stil new with only part of it painted.

Janice indicated the new building. "That's my wholesale warehouse. I hope to supply the entire retail business in town soon now. I already have the majority of the businessmen lined up. That adobe there is the office."

"You've done well, Janice," Tom said.

"Oh, I've been lucky, and had the breaks," she said, smiling at him. "I'll tell you about it, later. First you get cleaned up, then we'll talk."

Quite a setup, Tom thought. Thirty wagons took a hell of a lot of mules, and feed and men—and money. Jessup, a bruiser with killer eyes. Crider, a plain out and out gunslinger. Cameron, a back shooter. They all jumped to Janice's bidding. Quite a setup.

She would have a good story, she would even make it interesting. Not a word had she asked about his ranch. She suspects what happened, Tom thought, or maybe she thinks I was sent to the pen and escaped.

Tom Bolling was a dangerous man to Janice. Too dangerous to live. But he'd play along to see what he could learn. She wasn't likely to have him killed as long as she thought he was in hand. Or until she could set him up to make it look good.

They left the surrey with a hostler, and with Janice on his arm, walked to the big adobe building that was her office and living quarters. "Why line so far out, Janice?" he asked. "Wouldn't it be handier in town?"

"Fire, Tom," she said. "I feel better isolated. If the town burns it isn't likely to reach here, or even if it did, we could save it. It's three hundred yards to the nearest house. I'd like it even farther but it's so unhandy for business reasons."

Fire. Now why hadn't some disgruntled victim of Janice's thought of burning her out. It could work both ways. She could be burned out without destroying the town.

"I keep a patroling guard all night," she said. "There've been two attempts to burn me out. Joe Tanner, that's Kathy's father—or was—tried it. He was shot as he struck a match. He had a can of kerosene."

Janice's quarters were luxurious, almost garish. But it looked good to Tom, especially the hot bath, and clean clothes Janice brought him. After he was bathed, she insisted on applying some kind of antiseptic to his cuts.

Maybe she was going to kill him with kindness, Tom thought sourly. Later over a drink she said, "Now, Tom, why are you out here? Did you sell your ranch?"

"That's exactly what I did," Tom drawled. "Then a smart lawyer got the money." That wasn't a lie anyway!

"Oh, Tom, I'm sorry. Did you kill him? Are you on the dodge?"

He shook his head. "I'm in the clear, but broke, Janice. I'll pick up a job working cows, I reckon."

"No. You've got a job. I need a good man, a real man. All I have now are bums like Cameron and Jessup and Crider. You can be my manager, Tom, at a handsome salary, and other compensations, darling." Her smile was sweet, her eyes dewy. "Your first job can be to fire Jessup."

That mind of hers is like a wounded cottonmouth, Tom thought.

"No, on second thought. I won't need Crider either. They're both bullies, none of the men like them. You can fire both of them, Tom. You're man enough to run this outfit alone."

A GRUDGE fight, and a mad gunslinger. She wants to be sure. Maybe Cameron will help too. "That's real nice of you, Janice. But I don't know anything about the freight business."

"You don't need to. You have plenty of commonsense, and I can fill you in quickly enough. You're the man I want, Tom, please don't refuse."

She got up and came over to sit on the arm of his chair, her hand on his shoulder. "I'm so alone, Tom. Since Ray ran out on me, I—I might as well tell you. He left me

the second day out from your place. Tom, I think he did something bad and was scared. He cursed me terribly, said I was a drag to him. Then he beat me and rode away, taking both horses. A moving family found me, and I rode all the way out here with them. I was ready to do something desperate. I worked in a café and wrote to an uncle for money to come home on. But he was dead and his lawyers were looking for me. I inherited ten thousand dollars, and started this business with it. It's been hard, darling, and the way men look at me, and the women, too. I'm so lonesome I could die!" A pair of tears slid down her cheeks.

Then she was in his arms, sliding off the chair arm into his lap, her arms around his neck, pressing against him. Her lips sought his with expert blindness, burning him, and he could feel the pound of her heart and he found himself holding her, kissing her back.

"Oh, Tom, darling, I'm glad now, oh, so very glad! Can I tell you a secret?"

"Why not?" Tom asked, and was astonished at the thickness of his voice.

"Ray was jealous of you, Tom. He accused me of falling in love with you." Her lips nibbled at his face, caressing, kissing him lightly, her voice a breath. "And he was right, Tom, I do love you."

The blue eyes lifted slowly, meeting his gaze, so wide and innocent, swimming with happy tears, tender with love. Despite himself, Tom was almost convinced. He knew he had to get the hell out of there before he believed it! Another pair of blue eyes accused him from his memory, a proud girl with a clear voice, staring shocked, stunned as Janice had run to him, a girl running out of the marshal's office. The girl with the pleasant manners, the frank regard of honest blue eyes.

Tom got to his feet.

"Tom, what's wrong? Have I been too bold? I was just carried away."

"It's all right," he said. "I'm sort of carried away myself. I'll sort of look around and get used to the idea."

Her smile as lovey, full of understanding. "Of course. You need some rest too. I was selfish, Tom, thinking only of myself. You've had a terrible fight besides being tired. You look around, have a drink and talk to folks. Then come back before night, and I'll have dinner for us. Just us, Tom, then we'll make plans. All right?"

"Sounds good."

She kissed him. "Now run along. Oh, wait!" She ran into the office and was back shortly with a handful of gold coins. She gave them to Tom. "The new manager of Janco will want to buy a few drinks for the house! There's your first months pay in advance!"

"Well, I don't—"

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Not another word!" She rubbed her cheek against his face. "I have a feeling there's a lot more where that came from. All I have is yours, Tom. Now run!"

Twice on the way back to town, Tom Bolling drew back his arm to hurl that gold away, but each time he did not. He looked at the golden double eagles. Three hundred dollars. He'd borrowed six thousand on his ranch, close to what he could have sold it for. It had taken every cent to see the long fight through. When he was cleared he'd signed the ranch over to his creditor, took one horse and rode away. So why not take the money. Janice still owed him five thousand and seven hundred dollars. Not counting his three years of wasted labor. But the money made him feel dirty despite his bath.

Why be noble, Bolling? Tom thought. Why not collect while you can? Take her money, it all came from the U.S. Treasury! Get your stake out of her that she took away from you. You're thirty years old, you'll never work out another stake.

He put the money in his pocket.

She'll have me killed soon. I'll take her up on that job, and I'll fire Jessup and Crider. If they take it I'll be sure.

The first man he ran into was old Shanks, just mounting a horse at the livery. Tom walked up to him, Shanks waiting, his face noncommital.

Tom Bolling said bluntly, "Shanks, I'm sorry I caused you trouble. Janice tried to hang a robbery and murder on me back in Texas. It cost me my ranch to clear myself. I found her, I wanted to be sure.

Now I would like you to point out a man or kid who can watch something and keep me informed. I want someone who doesn't like Janco."

Shanks regarded Tom Bolling steadily, and slowly his eyes lost their hardness. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know if Janice gets in touch with Crider and Jessup. I'll know what her orders are, but I must know if she communicates with them." He gave Shanks one of the golden twenties. "Can do?"

"Can do. Where'll you be?"

"I'll take a room at the hotel. I'll be on the porch."

Shanks mounted and rode off up the street. Tom moved on to the hotel, registered then went for his bedroll at the café.

IV

WHEN Tom Bolling entered the café, Kathy gave him an unsmiling regard. "Too bad your girl friend didn't show up sooner. It would have saved you a fight."

"I'm obliged to you, ma'am, for offering your help. I came for my bedroll."

"Take it. It'll have the Janco stink on it now!"

Tom picked up the roll, looked at Kathy, wanting to explain to her but knowing he could not. "Thank you, ma'am." He left, and took with him the memory of over bright eyes, the stiff set of Kathy's face.

He went to the hotel, carried his roll up to his room, then came down again to take a chair on the porch. He was aware that Cameron was watching him from the marshal's office, but he deliberately ignored the marshal. He took his gun out and carefully cleaned and reloaded it. He had been on the porch an hour when Cameron left the office and came over, planting himself in front of Tom.

"Have you known Janice long?"

"Awhile. Quite a woman, eh, Cameron? Incidentally, you'll get your orders from me from now on. I will be Janco's manager."

"The hell you will! I'll wait till I hear that from Janice."

"All right." Tom got to his feet, the full pressure of his wicked stare on Cameron. "You get it from her, and let that be the last time you cross me. Is that clear?"

Cameron's flat stare smeared but again he did nothing. Then he wheeled and strode away. Tom sat down, a small smile on his mouth. Now he'll check with Jessup and Crider, and he'll show it if I'm set up.

It lacked an hour till dark when a gimp legged man came out of the hotel, chose a chair near Tom and carefully started shaving tobacco from a plug for his pipe.

He gave Tom a sharp glance then said softly, "Shanks said tell you that the parties you were talking about had a talk with the she-cat and come out licking their chops and grinning. The two parties come to town and passed a few words with that sour tempered marshal, then he started licking his chops and grinning. That what you wanted to know?"

"That's good enough. I'm obliged to you."

"You're welcome. Me and Shanks have been partners for some time. I work for him, sort of, on his little place. We figure to both be in town tonight. At the livery." He got up and left, limping up the street.

Cameron came down the street, flashed Tom a triumphant look, his mouth sneering, then he went on to his office. Soon, Tom saw Jessup and Crider go into the Alamo Saloon, and he got up and crossed to the saloon and went in. Crider and Jessup were at the bar. Both ignored him.

Tom ordered a drink and rang one of the Janco gold pieces on the bar. "Set them up for the house," Tom said.

"Drinks on this gent, men, step up!"

There was a rush to the bar, and a man shouted, "To you, stranger."

Another asked, "Some special occasion?"

"Why, yes," Tom said, "to my new job. Manager for Janco." There was a quietening in the saloon, and Tom looked at Jessup and Crider. "Have you gents been informed of my new position?" When they nodded, Tom said, "It's my pleasure to fire both of you as of right now."

There was a gasp and a dead silence, then a murmur of amazement as Crider and Jessup both turned and walked out, merely glaring at Tom, and even the glares, Tom thought, weren't convincing.

"Stranger, I don't know your reputation," a man said. "But by God, here's to you!" He tossed off his drink. Others did too.

Tom lifted his brimming glass. "Here's to the boothill blonde, gents. May her reign be short!" He drank, then to many puzzled stares, he walked out.

All right, Tom thought, I've played it your way to now, Janice. But from here on I'll add my own little touches!

He saw Crider and Jessup down the street talking to Cameron. All three stood looking at Tom Bolling. Tom turned and walked toward the Janco yards. It was time he kept his supper date, and it would give Crider and Jessup time to make their war talk.

Somebody will come and give me a message soon after dark, he thought. Then they'll nail me on my way to town.

Janice was all blonde loveliness in a green dress and frilly apron. A maid was setting the table for two. "Hi, darling," Janice said, and kissed him. "I had begun to think you were about to stand me up."

Tom smiled. "Not a chance of that."

It was a good supper, and immediately afterwards, Janice dismissed the maid. She smiled at Tom, intimately, her eyes tender with promise. "I want you all to myself, Tom."

"A man doesn't have a chance with you, Janice. The most beautiful woman in Arizona, and she can cook too."

She came around to perch on the arm of his chair, her hand lightly in his hair. "Did you have any trouble with Jessup and Crider?"

"No, they were meek as lambs. Almost too meek."

"Be careful, Tom. They're mean. They might try to kill you."

THERE was a knock at the door. "Oh, bother!" Janice said. "I'll get rid of him!" There was a brief exchange then Janice hurried back, her eyes big and round. "Tom! Crider and Jessup are drinking, and mean. They've passed the word on you, they say they'll kill you."

Tom kept his face sober, expressionless. "Just for firing them?"

"Yes, for that and for beating Jessup. They swear they'll kill you. I could kill Cameron myself. Why doesn't he lock them up? I'll send him word to do it."

"No need," Tom said. "He wouldn't jail them. All they're doing is talking. Let it go."

"But, Tom, they'll kill you!" Her eyes begged him to deny it. "Tom, even if you came out of it, killed them, Cameron will arrest you. He's the sheriff's cousin, and if you fought him, you'd be outlawed."

So you win either way, don't you, Janice? Tom thought.

"I might have to run for it," Tom said. "Go to California maybe."

"No! No, Tom, I won't lose you now. I'll come to you." She ran to him, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him wildly. "I'll sell out and come to you."

"Would you, honey? But I can't run far unless I steal a horse. I should have bought one."

"I'll take care of that." She ran out, and shortly Tom heard her voice, but couldn't understand the words. She came back in as Tom walked into the office. "I'm having a good horse saddled, Tom. Wait."

She ran to the big safe in the corner, worked the combination, and swung the door back. "Bring the light, Tom."

He carried the lamp over and saw the big safe was stuffed with papers and a great deal of money. She took out a paper and wrote swiftly on it, and gave it to him.

"There's a bill of sale for the black." She took a metal box out and counted out another three hundred dollars, and as she replaced the box a buckskin bag with fancy bead work fell out. She hurriedly replaced it but not before Tom caught the beaded lettering, KATHY, on it. It was bulky with papers. Money? Janice was loaded!

"Here, Tom, in case you have to run. Don't try to contact me, I'll get word to the Post Office in San Diego, General Delivery. To Will Bolton. All right?"

"Sounds all right, Janice. I'd better go and take care of those characters."

She threw her arms around his neck again. "Hold me, Tom." He did, and she continued. "Be careful, darling," she whispered. "They're in the Alamo saloon. Circle and

go in the back, and, Tom, start shooting first."

He went out, and found the big black in front of the office, saddled. Smiling, Tom Bolling mounted and rode into the darknesss toward town. Behind him he heard a door close softly.

Tom Bolling tied the reins to the saddle-horn, slammed the black with his heels and hit him with his hat. The black lunged, snorted and hit a dead run. Tom rolled out of the saddle, fell loosely and came to his feet, palming up his six-shooter.

A gun blasted toward town, then three more shots. Muzzle flame slanted about saddle height, then Tom heard Jessup shout. "He ain't on it! Look out, Crider! He's loose back there!"

Tom started toward the warehouse, he would need cover. He did not want to carry the fight into town, and possibly kill some bystander. His movement was spotted.

He recognized Cameron's voice calling, "There he is, going for the warehouse."

A gun blasted, hammering four shots, sending lead dangerously close to Tom Bolling. Tom ran, and more shots screamed past, then nearing the warehouse, Tom fired twice and heard a man's shouted curse. A miss, but it had been close.

With the warehouse between him and his pursuers, Tom was reasonably sure they couldn't silhouette him or pick out his own bulk. He kept running, circling until he was almost fifty yards past the warehouse. He stumbled in a small wash, weeds thrashing his boots. Instantly, Tom turned, flattened his length in the ditch and lay still.

He could hear them running now, not shouting. Their boot sounds came close, passed him. He heard Crider's low order.

"Keep together, we don't want to shoot at each other."

The boot sounds went on, and Tom got up and ran lightly toward town. He could see a few of the more daring or curious people peering toward the warehouse from the end of the street. But there were only a few, most people had no liking to meet a wild bullet in the dark. Tom circled behind the south row of stores, coming to the street near the café, where Kathy worked.

Across the street, he saw a cowboy tying the black to a hitchrail. On the porch of the café, stood old Shanks, the gimp legged cowboy and Kathy.

"Oh, Shanks," Kathy said, "do you think they killed him?"

"I sort of doubt it," Shanks said.

"I'd be kind of skittish hunting that feller in the dark," the gimp legged cowboy said. "I figure he's a salty customer. Shanks, what you reckon his game is? He knows Janice is behind this, still he was playing right along with her."

"Whatever it is, I'm ready to help," Shanks said.

"Is it too late for coffee?" Tom asked, stepping out beside them.

They whirled, staring at him.

"By doggies! I told you!" Gimp said.

"Wasn't that you they were shooting at?" Kathy gasped.

Tom nodded. "That was me. But I wanted to ask you something before I have to light out, or get shot. By the way, my name is Tom Bolling. You folks have a right, helping me, to hear my end of it if you want to."

Kathy hurriedly took a key from her handbag, and whirled to the café doorway, unlocking it. "Let's go inside before they come hunting you." They went into the café and Kathy locked the door. "Come back to the kitchen. I'll light a lamp.

When a light showed in the back, they went into the kitchen and Kathy closed the connecting door then hung sacks over the kitchen window. They were regarding Tom now with wide eyed interest.

"When I heard your giving it to Crider, ma'am," Tom said to Kathy, "it seemed to put you on my side, whether you knew it or not." He told them his side then, how Ray Hughes and Janice had showed up at his ranch, sick, broke and the wagon a wreck. He explained how he'd taken them in, helped them and they'd asked him not to tell anyone that they were there. Janice's father, supposedly a well to do man, was looking for them, to kill Ray Hughes for eloping with his daughter. Then he told of the stage robbery, Ray's body being found, and his court fight that had cost him his ranch. He

also explained that he suspected Janice had planned the whole thing so cleverly, it was all circumstantial evidence pointing to Tom, and but for his accidental meeting with a cow hunting party, he would have been convicted of murder and robbery. But even then because his horses had been used in the robbery, and evidence of the Hughes's presence at his ranch, he'd almost been sent up as an accessory. No one believed a woman was implicated. One of the robbers had been a Mexican in a charro outfit, and Tom had seen that among Janice's possessions.

V

THEY listened in silence, then Shanks said, "Then she came here with that money, and not even the law was looking for a woman."

"That's right," Tom said.

"Tom, I'm sorry," Kathy said, "that I was so mean."

Tom smiled at her. "I'm surprised you weren't meaner, Kathy. You could only believe what you saw. But what I wanted, to know was about your trouble with Janco. What happened?"

"We owned a big store," she said. "Dad stood up to Janco and wouldn't pay their high rates. He started hauling for his own store and a few others. His wagons were wrecked. Later, Dad was shot. He was found near the Janco warehouse with a can of kerosene, dead. They claimed he was trying to set it afire, but they lied. They shot him and planted him there. The store burned the same night, with a northeast wind so it was the only building burned, except our house which was right behind it. Dad had a lot of money on hand, he'd just sold some mining property. I think they robbed him then shot him, burned the store and planted him out there."

"Sounds about right for Janice," Tom said. "Is there anything else?"

They stared at him. She answered puzzled. "No, I don't think so."

"What was the money in, bills, gold? A box?"

"Bills," she said. "It was in a elkskin bag that Chief Nokay once gave me. It had my name in bead work on it."

"That's what I wanted to know. I saw that bag in Janice's office safe awhile ago. It fell out when she was giving me money to run to California on if I killed Crider and Jessup!"

Kathy sat down. "I knew it. I knew it."

"I reckon we'd better get the sheriff," Shanks said. "That'll pin robbery, and I expect, murder on them."

"Isn't the sheriff kin to Cameron?"

"Hell no, he hates Cameron's guts! Why?"

"Janice said he was kin to Cameron. That was just more insurance in case I got ideas, I reckon. Can you send someone after him, Shanks? How quick can you get him?"

"Gimp here can go. It's sixty miles. Can't get him here before tomorrow. I only hope he hasn't gone someplace. Gimp take that pinto and hit the road."

Kathy let Gimp out the back door, then turned a worried face to Tom. "They'll hunt you all over town. They'll have the whole Janco bunch after you, Tom."

"Kathy," Shanks said, "me and you'll get out and leave Tom here. That'll be the best bet."

"Yes, I—"

"Shanks!" Gimp called from the back door. "Hey, Shanks, I just saw that damned sneaky Pinson slide away from the front, and go hotfooting for Janco. He saw us and is going to tell them. You'll have to clear out of there!"

"All right, Gimp," Tom said. He turned to Kathy and Shanks. "Kathy, you'd best open up again. Keep them from tearing the place up. I'll slide out of here and lay low."

"That's best I reckon," Shanks said. "Head for my place. South ten miles, then bear left between two buttes and turn right around the right hand one three more miles. Better hurry."

"Let me out the back, Kathy, just in case they're beginning to look toward town for me."

She let him out with a whispered, "Good luck, Tom."

He pressed her hand briefly and felt her answering pressure. It surprised and pleased Tom Bolling at the exultance that small touch sent coursing through him, the ten

feet tall feeling it sent into him.

Tom stood in the darkness behind the café for a little while, letting his eyes accustom themselves to the dark, then he moved on around the café and up the side. He paused at the front, listening then took a quick look down the street toward Janco. A block down the street, a small knot of men stood, one gesturing excitedly, waving his hand back toward Tom. Then three of them started running up the street, and as they passed through a pool of light, Tom recognized Crider, Jessup and Cameron.

He'd never make the black now, not with three men shooting at him at close range. He faded back along the café, paused briefly at the rear then ran lightly down the alley toward Janco. They would not think he was fool enough to go back there.

He paused in the darkness a half block away from the café, looking back. He could hear the pound of running feet, then suddenly they ceased. There was a crash, and light spilled out the rear doorway of the café, and Tom glimpsed Jessup, gun in hand as he went in.

Tom ran on then, and was just crossing behind a saloon when a small man collided with him, a startled shout bursting from his throat. Tom saw that he was the same man who had run to warn Cameron and the others.

The little man was scrambling away, bawling at the top of his lungs, "Here he is! Here he is! Marshal! Crider!"

With a curse, Tom leaped forward, his fist swinging, but the little man dodged, taking the blow on a shoulder, screeching in panic. Tom swung again and this time the blow landed flush and the screeching stopped.

BUT the damage was done. Jessup and Crider leaped out the back of the café, guns blasting a thunder of sound. Bullets whipped and cried about Tom, screamed off the ground and popped wood as they hit the stores.

Tom fired twice, jumped for the saloon's corner and fired twice more. Cameron came out and all three fired. Hoping they would be blinded for a second by the muzzle blasts, Tom leaped out and was through the light, running for the Janco barns, circling wide of the lights now.

Abruptly, the guns were silent back there, and Tom slowed down, knowing they were listening to pick up any sound. He continued on at a light trot, picking his way as carefully and as silently as he could.

He paused often to listen too, and it was one of these pauses that he heard the sound of boots in the sand, running on tip-toe. He placed the sound on the street, coming around the last store where he stood some hundred feet behind it.

They meant business, and some one of them was using his head. Crider. Not Jessup or Cameron. But Crider wouldn't take a chance on being tricked. He'd stay to control Jessup. The running man was probably Cameron.

Tom waited, knowing he couldn't go on without being seen by that man. It was fight now, and his chances were better while he was set. He reloaded his gun, and was snapping the gate when a man came slowly from around the store, crouching, peering toward Janco barns.

He circled out more from the store, a wide bulk as he tried to skylight Tom toward the barns.

"Over here, fellow," Tom called softly.

Instantly, a muzzle blast burst from that bulk and the bullet sang close. Tom lifted his gun and fired twice. The gun yonder flashed again, the flame bursting downward. Then a short silence before a man said, "Aah!" with a rising sound.

Tom ran then, and he was half way to the barn, hearing Crider shouting Cameron's name. Then Cameron cried, shrilly, "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

Tom made the barn and looked back. Two lanterns were moving where Cameron had fallen and he could see the marshal being lifted. In the light he saw the two silhouettes, much nearer the barn. Crider and Jessup were pushing the fight now.

Two lanterns lighted the huge barn, front and rear, and several men were leaving, heading for town. One man remained, a rifle in his hands. The guard Janice had mentioned. Tom slid in the rear end of the

hallway as the others left the front. He moved silently up the dark hall, and was ten feet from the man with the rifle when he seemed to sense Tom's presence, began his turn.

"Hold it," Tom said. "I'll gut you with a bullet."

The man froze. "I ain't in this fight."

"Then drop that rifle and light out of here. Quick, mister!"

The man dropped the rifle and ran after the others. Tom heard Crider's shout and Jessup's bawl of rage, and angry answers. "I'll fire the bunch of you and stomp the hell out of you too." Jessup roared.

"To hell with you, Jessup, I quit."

Another shouted. "Don't try anything. There're six of us."

There was a short silence, then Crider's curse. "Jess, take the front, I'll cover the rear. We got him hemmed now."

Tom, knowing he couldn't guard both front and rear, turned into the darkness to one side, and eased up to the front wall, just out of reach of the lantern light. If he could take Jessup, that would increase his chances with Crider. The gunman would be a handful all by himself.

He glimpsed Jessup's bulk easing up to the opening on the opposite side of the door. Then a line of the man was in sight. Tom lifted his gun, hating to do it but knowing he had no other choice. The ball was opened and his own life was on the line. At the last second, he dropped the muzzle a little, and fired.

Instantly, Tom was running for the door, knowing Jessup would be shocked still for a moment with the bullet's impact. Even then he almost didn't make it. Crider's gun blasted from the rear and the bullet plucked at Tom's shirt across his back. Then he was through the door and out of line with Crider.

He glanced back and saw Jessup sitting down against the barn, lifting his gun while he gripped his leg with his other hand. Tom flung a bullet at him as Jessup's gun spurted flame. The shot missed but caused Jessup to miss, too. Then Tom was gone into the darkness. Jessup emptied his gun, the bullets singing wide of Tom.

"Which way did he go?" Crider shouted at Jessup.

"Towards town, damn him! He broke my leg."

Tom had circled, and now he stopped in the shadow of the office, gasping back his wind as silently as he could. He could hear Crider running toward town. He eased to the corner of the building, glancing around at the door. That would be locked, of course, Janice was holed up, waiting for the victor, smiling her lovely smile, knowing she had won either way.

Then he heard the key in the door. It swung open, and Janice stepped out, looking toward town, then she shrugged and stepped back inside. Tom didn't hear the key so after a moment he moved softly over to turn the knob. The door swung open.

The office was dark but some light came through the slightly opened door to Janice's quarters. Tom shut the door gently, and moved to the inner door. He peeped through but Janice was not in sight. He stepped into room. Then he saw Janice.

VI

SHE was in the corner to his left, where his gun would have to swing the farthest, and she was aiming a sawed-off shotgun pointblank at him. She was smiling, but her blue eye along the barrel were cold as ice.

"Hello, darling," Janice said. "I thought you might be out there."

Tom let his gun sag then holstered it. His grin was wry. "I fell into that, didn't I?"

"Men are naturally stupid. I find it little trouble to deal with them. But then some are so stupid they can't even kill one man." She lowered the shotgun to hip level but it was steady, her fingers tight on the triggers. He was only a space away from death.

"You knew all along, didn't you, Tom?"

"Yes."

"How did you like that little setup I left for you in Texas, Tom?"

"That was close," Tom said. "It cost me my ranch to get out of it."

"Too bad, Tom. Ray was a fool, like

all men. I didn't need him any longer. He didn't have the guts I needed in a man. In a way, Tom, I'm sorry about you, I think we could get along. You wouldn't reconsider would you? I'd pay you well."

"I couldn't stomach you, Janice, you already know that."

"Yes, I suppose. Well, Tom, it was nice knowing you. I have to defend my honor, you know. You shouldn't have broken in here!" Her eyes were cold, set. "Move back into the office, Tom, I don't want to mess up this living room."

"Shall I get over by the safe, so you can say I was robbing it?"

"That won't be necessary. You can draw if you like Tom, you won't make it though."

Tom said, as he turned for the office, "You murdered Kathy's father, didn't you? And robbed the store?"

"He was fighting Janco. I made a neat fifteen thousand profit too. I suppose you had to tell her about seeing the bag? I slipped up there, but I liked the bag, I was going to have the beadwork changed. Turn around, Tom!" She stopped just inside the door, and he tightened for the shock of buckshot and the draw he would make.

"Don't move! I have a shotgun too, Janice." Kathy's grim voice came from just beyond the wide open outer door. "Just bat an eye, you hellcat, and I'll blow you apart!"

Janice had gone white, her eyes staring.

"Uncock that gun and lay it on the floor, and do it quick," Kathy said.

Janice did. Kathy came through the door, her own shotgun bearing on Janice.

"Tom, is that safe open?" Kathy asked.

He tried the knob. "No." He looked at Kathy's white face, the blue flame of her eyes. "I'll get a lamp in here." He stepped past Janice and returned with a lamp. He set it on a small table in front of a heavy drape. "She's all yours, Kathy. You'd better hurry though, I hear a lot of shouting from town. Looks like a mob headed this way."

Kathy said. "I told them about the bag. A lot of them know it, and Shanks is talking it up. We were trying to get help for you." She turned her eyes on Janice. "Open the safe."

"No. You wouldn't dare murder me."

"Wouldn't I? You murdered my father—or had it done. With people no longer scared after the way Tom has fought you, they'll tear you apart, Janco. They were already talking of burning Janco to the ground when I left. I'll get a medal for shooting you, and you know it. Move!"

Janice stood stiffly, and Tom said, "She'll get it anyway, Janice. You might as well open it."

For another half-minute, Janice glared at them, then moved to the safe, twirled the dial and wrenched the door open. She took out the bag and hurled it at Kathy who caught it with her left hand, still keeping the shotgun trained on Janice.

Janice started to swing the door shut, but Tom stepped forward, catching it. She whirled on him, clawing, suddenly screaming curses. "You'll not! You'll not get a nickel of it."

Tom's open hand sent her sprawling. "Leave it open," he said. "We'll appoint a committee to look through it, or guard it until the sheriff gets here."

"I'll see you dead first!" Janice screamed. Her face was no longer beautiful, but drawn with a vicious rage, her eyes staring and savage. Her skirt had hiked up as she fell and now her hand darted under it, pulled a small derringer from a leg holster.

Tom leaped forward, his boot slashing out. His toe caught her hand and the derringer, tearing the weapon out of her hand and sending it skidding across the room.

"Janice," Tom Bolling said tightly, "you're making it hard for us not to put a bullet in you. You richly deserve one, right between the eyes."

"To hell with you, you stupid idiot!"

NOW, what's this?" Crider said from the doorway. He stepped into the room, swinging the door closed. His gun was leveled at Tom, but it only needed a tilt to bear on Kathy who was caught with her shotgun's muzzle across her body from Crider, the butt toward him.

"Now, speaking of safes, I'll take that bag, honey," he said to Kathy. "Hand it over! And you, Bolling, scratch out any other

handy cash and toss it over. Old Crider is taking a ride. He's running out on his boss but with his pockets full of cash. Move!"

"You can't get away with it, Crider," Tom said. "Hear that mob? They'll be here in a minute."

"You're wrong. They're heading for the barn and warehouse. Talking of fire, too." His teeth showed in a grin. "A big fire. I can kill you, Bolling, and get it myself."

"The shot will bring them running."

Crider nodded. "Yes, but I'll be gone, with that elkskin bag and you'll be dead!"

"Go on, Tom," Kathy said. "He means it!" She tossed him the bag.

Crider caught it without taking his eyes off Tom Bolling. "Kathy's smart. She's right, too."

"You aim to kill me anyway," Tom said. "After the way I ran you ragged, you will."

"Right again. A man's got his pride." He grinned. "You going to rake that money out?"

"I reckon so," Tom said.

"Wait!" Janice cried. "Crider, I have plenty of money there you won't get, it will take you too long to find it. Take me with you, and I'll get it."

Crider hesitated, greed shining in his eyes, his chance of a life time stake right in his hands. "It's a deal, honey. Get it! You, Kathy, lay that shotgun down and get over by Bolling." He waited while Kathy obeyed then moved over to Tom. "Now you, Bolling, drop your gunbelt."

Janice was hurriedly opening ledgers with false covers, pushing thin sheafs of bills into a bag.

"Look at that money!" Tom shouted.

Crider had seen it, but still his greed got the better of him, his eyes darted a brief glance at the money, and Tom lunged to his left, drew and fired even as he hit the floor.

Crider fired, his shot breaking the bowl of the lamp. He snapped a second shot at Tom, as Tom fired again. The lamp flamed high as it dropped, then there was darkness for a breathless, gunfire ripped moment. Then a whoosh of flame as the kerosene caught. In the flaring light, Crider was down, trying to lift his too heavy gun for another shot. Tom Bolling, on his knees now, shot him again, between the eyes.

The flames were roaring now, spreading up the drapes, leaping up the wall and singing Janice's hair as she screamed something about money and clawed in the safe.

"Tom!" Kathy screamed. "Are you hurt?"

"No, just a bullet burn. Let's get out of here, this place will be a furnace in a minute."

Kathy snatched up the elkskin bag, turning for the door. Tom followed her, grabbing Crider by the collar, dragging him outside. "Janice!" Tom shouted. "Come on out, you little fool!"

"She's saving all of her money!"

Tom rushed back into the inferno of the office. Already flames were licking into the other room, the office was blazing furiously from the spreading oil. Janice was screaming, grabbing ledgers. Tom leaped to her, sheilding his face with his arm, grabbed her.

She fought him savagely, hanging onto the safe's handle. Tom tore her grip loose, dragging her, fighting every step, toward the door, and he didn't look back to see the sack caught on the safe handle, already blazing up in flame.

Janice was screaming, kicking and clawing, and once outside, Tom flung her away. She bounced up, charging for the door. Tom grabbed her, swung her around, then as she flew at him, he hit her on the jaw. He hit her with his fist, harder than he aimed to, and she collapsed in a limp heap. He picked her up and carried her from the building.

She was a mess. Her blonde hair was a neutral color, nearly all of it singed off. Her face was red, blistered and peeling in places. Kathy was beating out several spots of fire on her clothes.

Tom went back and pulled Crider father away. The gunman was dead, the entire front of his shirt red with blood.

"Tom, look!" Kathy cried.

He looked, and saw men with torches running along the warehouse, piling weeds, sticks, anything they could get against the wall, setting it afire. A man was in the door of the hayloft, lighted by a dozen lanterns.

(Continued on page 97)

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FIGHTER UNAFRAID

Wyatt Earp was as tough as they claim—and twice as fearless

By JOHN PATTEN

HEY, Jack, what's your hurry?"

Wyatt Earp looked up from dealing faro as the batwing doors of the Oriental Saloon fanned open and two wild-eyed, dust-powdered men burst in.

"There's a mob right behind us," panted Jack McCann. "They want to lynch Johnny. Hide him quick, for God's sake."

"I'll take care of him," said Earp. Calmly he paid off a few winning bets, levelled off the tops of the chips in the check-rack, then turned up his box.

"You fellows," he told the players, "hold on to your chips. I'll cash 'em soon as I get this little matter attended to."

He had heard the warning shriek of mine whistles on the hill, had seen men streaming up from the shafts and heading in to town, and knew there'd been a killing—one of many in Arizona's raw, rip-snorting days.

"Come on," he said and beckoned to the terror-stricken Johnny O'Rourke, promptly hustling him off to a vacant bowling alley between two buildings in the next block north.

The front door was locked from the outside, and Doc Holliday, gaunt, sardonic killer and friend of Earp, was left to stand guard there with his sawed-off shotgun. Virgil Earp, Wyatt's brother, took up his post at the rear door.

Wyatt Earp didn't know Johnny O'Rourke from Adam's off ox, and didn't hanker to. But as the wearer of a U.S. deputy marshal's star, it was part of his job to protect his prisoner, even if he had to do some killing or get killed himself—and he didn't relish either.

His ears caught an ugly sound—a rumbling, bestial bellow, rising in volume as the hate-maddened mob came near. Sweeping in like a wave, the howling mass of men poured through Fifth Street, surging around the Oriental in a threatening flood.

"He ain't here." Voices roared in disgust. "They got him in the bowling alley."

With a yell of fury, they charged around the corner into Allen Street, to see Wyatt Earp confronting them.

Feet wide apart, shoulders squared, he stood alone in the middle of the narrow street, a double-barreled shotgun nestling in the crook of one elbow. His glance surveyed the crowd.

"Now, boys," he said, raising a hand for order. "You better go back where you come from. No sense in you ki-hootin' around here."

The mob halted briefly. A harsh voice demanded, "Bring out that murdering so-and-so. We want him."

"He's right over there." Earp nodded toward the bowling alley. "And there he's going to stay. He's my prisoner and you won't get him."

"He killed Hank Schneider, the engineer from Charleston," thundered an irate chorus, "and we aim to string him up pronto."

There was a forward surge of the mob. Rifles and shotguns were brandished recklessly.

"You boys clear out now." From his casual manner, Wyatt might have been rebuking a pack of unruly lads. "Go on back to work. I'm telling you again, *you can't have my prisoner*!"

The marshal's words slowed the mob for a moment. Then they set up a fierce, bloodthirsty yell. Some old Apache fighters were in the crowd, and they sounded the savage war cry—a series of wild staccato whoops.

"Come on, boys," shouted the leader. "Break in the door and get him!"

The sight of Doc Holliday and his sawed-off shotgun blocked that move. The pale, reed-thin consumptive was noted as a dead-sure shot.

"Who's got a rope?" rose the cry. "We'll hang the murdering rat to a telegraph pole."

Wyatt Earp lifted his double-barreled shotgun higher, aiming straight at the human wall. "Come on, you pack of cowards! Come and get him if you can!"

"He's bluffing!" Men pushed forward cautiously. The muttering rose to a sullen roar.

Earp's keen glance rested on the leader—a dark-browed, bull-necked miner with a blaring voice.

"Take one step nearer," warned Earp, "and I'll fill you so full of lead it'll run out of your ears!"

Bull-neck rumbled defiance in his throat, but kept his distance.

Wyatt's shotgun went to his shoulder with a businesslike snap. "Don't think I'm bluffing," he said quietly. "The first man that takes one more step this way gets a bellyful of lead. *I mean it.*"

"Whatcha waitin' for?" impatient voices bawled. "Come on, let's rush him."

Men began to press harder from the rear. The front rank bent and swayed before the force from behind. A howl of hatred rose: "*Kill him*!"

Wyatt Earp faced the mob unflinching. "All right, kill me." His voice was even, almost casual. "I'm ready. Ought to be easy enough, with so many of you. But before you get me, I'll do some killing myself."

For one hushed moment the mob stood motionless. Here was something they hadn't bargained for. Here stood a man ready to die just to protect a murderer. Sure, they could kill him. One shot might do the business. *But were they ready to die, too*? No telling how many might crumple before that double charge of buckshot. And there was Doc Holliday to reckon with, too. It was a big gamble. Who wanted to fire the first shot, take the long chance?

Suddenly the deadly tension eased. The bull-necked leader retreated, grumbling to himself. The menacing tumult dwindled and died away. The front line buckled and broke up, easing shamefacedly back into the crowd.

No sense, the mob decided, getting themselves killed all for the sake of a dirty little rat like Johnny O'Rourke. This lynching business was pretty risky, come to think of

it. Might as well wait and let the law do the hanging.

Singly and in shuffling groups, men begun to drift back toward the mines. Wide gaps opened in the shifting mass. The tread of departing feet must have been music to the ears of Johnny O'Rourke, crouched under a table in the bowling alley. Soon all had gone except for a scattered few lingering here and there.

Leaning on his shotgun, Wyatt Earp stoically watched the last of the mob filter out of sight. Then he went back to the Oriental. He stood the shotgun in its corner, pushed his black sombrero back in his mane of tawny hair.

"Doc and Virge are taking Johnny over to the Tucson jail," he remarked. "Any of you fellows holding chips, I'm ready to cash 'em now."

That was all. The man who had quelled a frantic mob took his seat at the faro table. It was all in the day's work. Nothing to make a fuss about.

COMING West as a tall, rawboned farm youth with a mop of tawny hair, Wyatt Earp fitted easily in the robust frontier life. A party of Government surveyors was going into the Indian Territory wilds, and young Earp hired out as hunter. Woods and prairie swarmed with game, and he kept the camp supplied with buffalo meat, antelope and wild turkey.

After that job folded, he worked as a freighter on the Santa Fé trail, popping his bull whip over the plodding ox-teams. In more than one brush with hostile Indian bands, his Winchester took its toll. He hunted on the buffalo range when the plains were covered with the grazing herds. But as the shaggy beasts were slaughtered for their hides, he foresaw their extinction. He sold his outfit, paid off his skinner, and headed for the booming Kansas cow camps.

Wichita was running wild and wide open when Wyatt, an impressively tall, moustached bucko of twenty-five, became town marshal there, in 1874. His fame in dealing with the drunken cowboys and badmen of Ellsworth had preceded him. He was what Wichita needed—a two-gun man for a risky two-gun job. When he ordered an offender to get out of town for keeps, the man obediently got.

Wyatt even dared to take on the redoubtable Shanghai Pierce when that swaggering cattle baron went on a wild whoopee and refused to give up his gun. A crack on the head and he was dumped in jail. A gang of Shang's cowboys reared up and set out to tree the town, but were subdued when Earp whacked them over the head and tossed them in the pokey with their boss.

"Have any trouble with Shang?" he was asked later.

"Not a bit," answered Earp. "I just calaboosed him, that's all."

Two years of riding herd on the rampant Texas buckaroos, and Wichita began to simmer down. New cattle trails swung the great herds to Dodge City, and there was an exodus of gamblers and dancehall girls. The mayor of Dodge, desperate for help, wired Earp to come and take over in the rough, tough and sinful cowboy capital.

Always quiet and soft-spoken, moving with leonine power and dignity, Wyatt Earp was the law in Dodge for three tumultous years. In a town bristling with gun-toters, he often dared to go unarmed. With his Colts in their holsters, he marched up to a drunken braggart, jerked his guns away, buffaloed him with a crack on his skull, and had him calaboosed before the fellow knew what had hit him.

Shanghai Pierce had taken his comeuppance at the hands of Marshal Earp in good spirit, but some of his touchy Texas friends got together and announced that they would pay a bounty of a thousand dollars to the man who would kill Wyatt Earp.

"I hear there's a price on your head," said Wyatt's friend and shooting ally, Doc Holliday. "But the fellow that shoots you has got to kill me first."

"It's nothing to worry about," answered Wyatt. "The man after that bounty will get his nerve up with redeye whisky, and by that time he'll be so drunk I can handle him easy."

Clay Allison, dandified showoff who boasted that his specialty was killing city marshals, dropped into Dodge early one

morning, announcing that he had come to kill Wyatt Earp. His boasts grew louder with each drink, and while Earp was having a late breakfast, several men came to warn him the killer was in town and looking for him.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Wyatt. "I'll choose my own time to see him." He crooked a finger at the waitress and ordered another cup of coffee. He knew that the longer he kept Allison waiting, the more drinks he would take aboard. And the less accurate his shooting eye would be.

Sauntering down the street, Wyatt saw Allison leaving a saloon. The two men met outside. Mouthing threats, the gunman lurched against his target. His gun was half out of its holster when suddenly it clattered to the walk, and his hands went grabbing for air. No one saw Earp draw, but all at once his .45 was held against Allison's left side. Clay Allison's bluff had been called, and he knew it.

"I'm leaving town," he murmured hoarsely, as the gun pressed harder.

"Go right on," snapped Wyatt, with an urgent poke of the muzzle, *"and don't come back."*

Allison took the hint, galloped out of town and kept on traveling, knowing he could never show his face in Dodge again while Wyatt Earp was the law.

One summer night Marshal Earp stood outside the Bijou Theater, keeping an eye peeled for stray drunks and gun-toters. A lone horseman galloped past, his sixgun pumping. One shot narrowly missed Wyatt. More bullets whacked into the theater's plank wall.

As Wyatt wheeled to fire, the cayuse reared and plunged, then bolted for the toll bridge. The marshal aimed and fired at long range. He heard the pony's hoofs beat a slowing tattoo on the bridge floor, then stop. They found the young rider mortally wounded by a shot in the back, his pony standing over him. There were no takers for the Texans' bounty after that.

The mighty stream of Dodge's cattle trade began to dwindle as new cowtowns, each striving to be as rowdy and raucous as Dodge, opened up along the railhead. Gamblers and dancehall denizens left for greener fields, and grass began to take root in Hell Street.

Being the law in Dodge lost its charm for Wyatt Earp. He found himself in the strange position of patrolling uncrowded streets, with few fighting-drunk cowboys to be buffaloed and tossed in jail.

WHEN, one July morning, a mysterious horseman rode into town and asked around for the marshal, Wyatt welcomed the diversion. Displaying a pair of sixguns, the visitor had a few drinks, and asked the barkeep where Earp might be found.

"He might drop in any minute," said the man behind the bar, "but you better shed that hardware. The marshal won't stand for gun-toting."

"He will from me," bragged the stranger. "I've got a gun here with twenty credits, and every last one of 'em a marshal."

Gaining new courage from several slugs of whisky, the visitor went out to the plaza, where a growing crowd listened avidly to his boasts. He was so busy talking that he failed to notice a tall, tawny-moustached man, his face shadowed by a wide-brim black sombrero, a badge fastened on his soft white shirt, come striding through the crowd.

"I understand you want to see me," said the man. "My name's Wyatt Earp."

With that, Wyatt administered two hard slaps, and before the dazed stranger could recover, grabbed his guns, only to shove them back into the holsters.

"Now," said the marshal of Dodge, "get out of here. You're not worth locking in the calaboose. Hurry up or I'll start you with a boot in the seat of the pants."

To be certain his order was obeyed, Wyatt marched the man over to his pony and hoisted him to the saddle. As the unknown rider headed for the bridge, he turned and shook his fist at the marshal, then left the town forever.

Excitement and danger were in Wyatt's blood. As Dodge's edge grew dull, and even the minor thrill of gambling palled, he hit the trail for Tombstone, that howling wonder of a town already overrun with the law-defying element.

For a few months, Wyatt Earp rode shotgun for the Wells Fargo Company on the Benson stages. Other stages were waylaid and looted on lonely mountain trails, but the very sight of that lank, moustached figure seated by the driver, a shotgun balanced across his knees, was enough to make the boldest highwayman hesitate. As long as Wyatt rode, the Benson stages were left alone.

Fearless and outspoken, Wyatt made some bitter enemies in Tombstone. Outlaws feared and hated him, and swore to get his scalp. He feuded with the cocky little Johnny Behan when both men ran for the coveted office of sheriff of Cochise County. Backed by the sinister power of Old Man Clanton and his rustling band, Johnny got the plum.

As sheriff, Johnny tactfully looked the other way when the Clanton-McLowery gang pulled its high-handed cattle raids across the border. Even after the Old Man and his gunmen ambushed a Mexican pack train in Skeleton Canyon, Johnny refused to interfere.

When Wyatt Earp stalked the streets of Tombstone, the silver star of a U.S. deputy marshal gleaming on his shirt, the little sheriff's anger seethed. For the marshal was giving orders to the Clantons and other outlaws, and making his orders stick. Ike Clanton made open threats against the marshal's life, only to have Wyatt tell him, tauntingly, to go and sleep off his drunk.

When the Clantons sent word to Wyatt and his brothers that they were waiting in the O.K. Corral, and they'd either have to fight or leave town, the Earps chose to fight. Following that bloody battle, where Morgan and Virgil Earp fell wounded, and where three of the rustlers were killed, Johnny Behan pompously attempted to arrest the Earps and Doc Holliday.

Eying the chunky sheriff up and down, Wyatt snorted scornfully and brushed him aside as though he were a pesky fly.

After Morgan Earp was killed while playing a game of billiards, Wyatt trailed the assassins and took swift revenge. Irked by Wyatt's cool defiance, Sheriff Behan tried to arrest him for the shooting of Frank Stilwell, one of the Clanton gang. Wyatt turned on him like a wounded lion.

"You can't arrest me," he roared, "and you know it."

He snapped his fingers under the little man's nose and marched away.

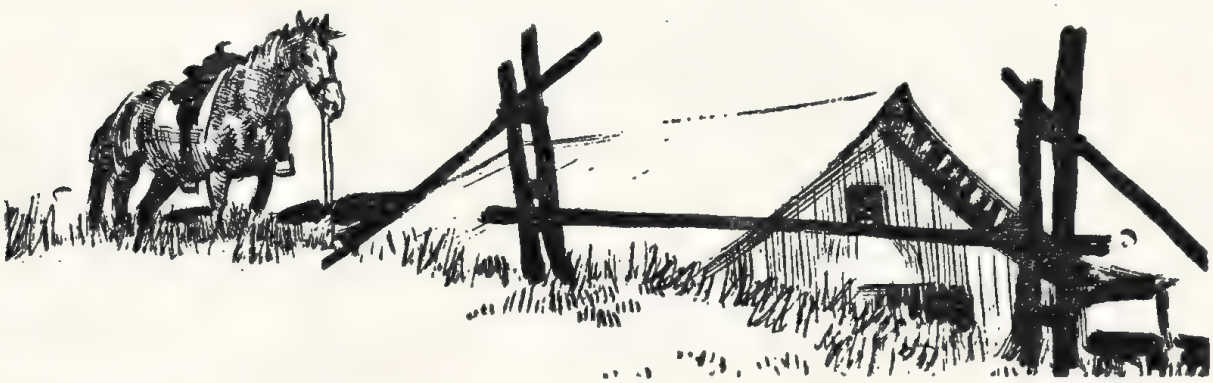
During his stay in Tombstone, Wyatt Earp had made loyal friends and bitter enemies. The surviving remnants of the Clanton-McLowery gang began closing in on him like a pack of snarling jackals. In the deepening murk of hatred, Wyatt and his faithful ally, Doc Holliday, defied their foes.

But at last, with Morgan dead and another brother, Virgil, so desperately wounded that he was a lifetime cripple, the lonely, embittered marshal decided to shake the dust of Tombstone from his boots.

With a small but devoted following, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday rode out of Tombstone forever, walking their mounts down Allen Street, their faces grimly impassive, their shotguns across the saddle, their gaze meeting coldly the stare of hostile eyes.

Men who hated Wyatt Earp's very guts, men who would have killed him long ago if they dared, stood awed by the man's intrepid bravery.

The tawny-maned lion of Tombstone has been long gone, but his name remains a legend and a byword for valor to this day.



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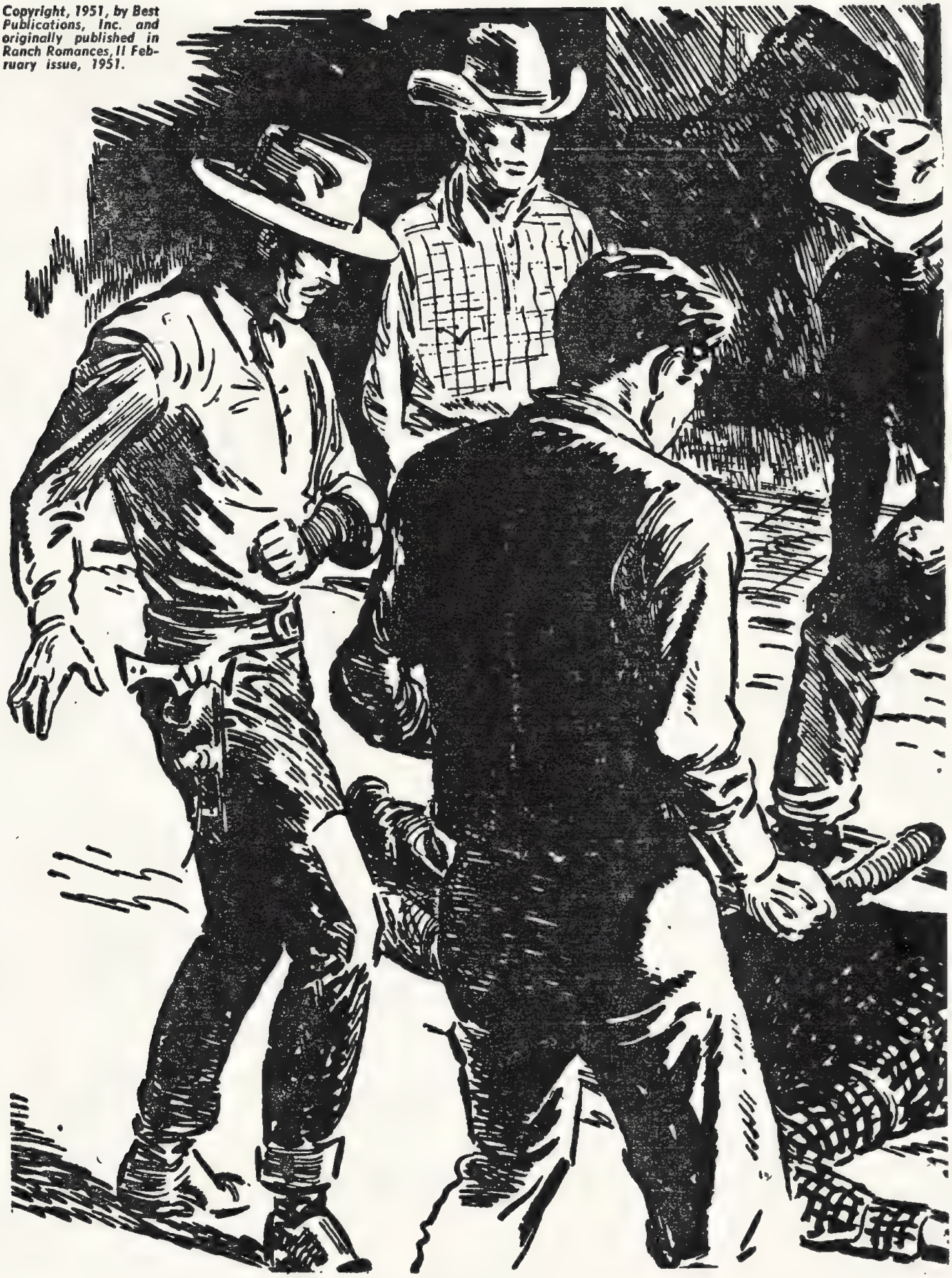

The Wildcatter

A Novel By Joseph Chadwick

Rowdy Jim Kane was a wildcat driller headed straight for hell till the lovely Tracy hired him to stoke another kind of fire

I

THEY called him Rowdy Jim, and among oil field workers a nickname was not lightly bestowed upon any man. He'd come by his honestly enough, Rowdy Jim Kane had. Any driller, tool-pusher or roughneck could relate the story of that brawl, in a Cherokee Strip oil town bar some years back, wherein he'd earned it.

He was an independent driller, one of those wildcatters who owned a drilling rig of sorts and who could make hole for shoestring operators and shady promoters able to pay the price. Not in stock, but in cold, hard cash. The terms lost a wildcat driller an occasional fortune, perhaps, but more often it kept him from holding the bag.

Despite the geologists, oil was where you found it.

A driller like Rowdy Jim seldom managed to get in on the opening of a new field. The big outfits saw to that, and, in fact, his sort seldom struck oil. If he was hired by a shoestring operator, bankruptcy usually kept the hole from going deep enough. If he was drilling for a shady promoter. . . . Well, there was quick money for such blacklegs in absconding with the money harvested from eager suckers in a stock swindle.

But Rowdy Jim sank the first test hole at Arroyo Blanco and brought in a gusher. He collected a five-thousand dollar profit when the well was spudded down, and his name was on every pair of lips in the big Espada field. For a night he was the biggest man in town, and it was his night to howl.

Espada, Arizona.

Until six months ago, when Globe-Pete's discovery well came in, Espada was a drowsy cowtown. The cowhands hardly knew it now. A lot of them were climbing derricks and digging sumps instead of riding broncs and chousing cows. Espada had mushroomed, boomed. Its business sec-

tion was now five blocks long, and busy night and day. Hotels, restaurants, an opera house, stores and shops, rooming-houses, lunch-counters, saloons, gambling houses. A railroad was building in across the desert. There were people enough to keep every enterprise hustling, and beyond the swollen, swelling town was a forest of oil well derricks. It was a town to paint red, and Rowdy Jim Kane, with money in the pockets of his brand-new suit, wanted it a nice, bright shade.

He was doing the town high, wide and handsome. A crowd followed him, and he had a girl on each arm. One was a blonde, the other was a redhead. Rowdy Jim, his girls, and his fair-weather friends were drinking champagne. It wasn't really a man's drink, however, and if Rowdy Jim was drunk at all it was on his luck. By midnight, he was still celebrating and growing hungry at it. He led the way to the dining-room at the National House, which catered ordinarily only to oil barons, and demanded steaks two-inches thick "for everybody." Despite the lateness of the hour, he got service. Rowdy Jim on a spree wasn't a man to take no for an answer. As he told the hotel manager, "Steaks, friend, or I'll tear this place down around your ears!"

Steaks he got, and more champagne. For forty-odd people, all as rowdy as himself.

Rowdy Jim and the blonde named Flo and the redhead named Lou had a table to themselves. He was halfway through his two-inch steak when this girl came striding into the dining-room. She paused only long enough to have a disgruntled waiter point out the man she sought, then came striding to the table where Rowdy Jim sat with Flo and Lou.

She was wearing pants.

Now, oil field workers weren't accustomed to women who wore pants. They liked their women skirted and fancy. This girl wasn't fancy, and along with her pants she wore boots with spurs on them. She also wore a man's shirt, and a neckerchief about her neck. A broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap, and a quirt hung from her right wrist.

As she stopped by Jim's table, she caught the quirt in her hand and slapped it sharply against her thigh. She smelled of horses, not of perfume as did Flo and Lou. She looked at the two girls and sniffed. She looked at Rowdy Jim, and her eyes didn't like him.

She said, "Mr. Kane?"

He nodded assent with some reluctance, probing his memory in an attempt to recall if he'd ever given this girl reason to use a quirt on him now. He couldn't place her. He said, "You have the advantage of me."

"My name is Tracy Mason."

"Glad to know you, Miss—it is Miss?—Tracy."

Her eyes continued to dislike him. They were unusual eyes, Jim decided; they were gray, but not just gray—sort of silver colored. Her hair was jet-black, and she had a lot of it. It was tousled, and yet its very disorder became her. He was beginning to stare.

"I want to talk business with you, Kane," said Tracy Mason.

"Business?"

"About drilling a well for me."

Maybe it was the champagne. Maybe it was the girl herself who was giving Rowdy Jim that heady feeling. He said foolishly, "Look, Miss Mason; you've got me wrong. I drill oil wells, not water wells. If your cows are thirsty—"

She slapped her thigh with the quirt again, looking as though she wanted to slap him. Flo and Lou were becoming restless, and not hiding it. The others in the party were growing more noisy, more boisterous.

She said, "I'm talking about an oil well, Kane. I want to hire you to drill it."

"Sorry, honey—"

"Yes or no?"

"Now, don't try to pin me down," he said. "Maybe it's yes, maybe no. How can I say until I know you better?" He pulled a chair over from a nearby table. "Sit down, Tracy. Join the party. Have some fun. Maybe before the night is over I'll be saying 'yes' to you."

Flo and Lou looked daggers at the ranch girl.

She ignored them. "Yes or no, Kane?" she demanded—slapping the quirt again.

"You going to be unfriendly?"

"I'm trying to talk business."

Rowdy Jim shook his head regretfully. "I never talk business when I'm having a party," he told her. "Truth is, Miss Tracy Mason, I never take on a new drilling job while I'm in the money." He dug in his pocket, hauled out an untidy roll of bills. "See that? I've plenty of money, honey. And I won't work until I've gotten rid of it."

Tracy sniffed again. "The way you're carrying on, that stake wont last long," she said. "I've been told that you're a good driller, Kane. One of the best. I'd like to have you. . . ."

Her voice trailed away, for the blonde Flo was tugging at Jim's arm, trying to get him to take another sip of champagne. The redheaded Lou said out of the side of her mouth, "Beat it, you. Can't you see you're not wanted?"

Tracy nodded coolly and said, "Sure, I'm going."

BUT she lingered a moment longer, a speculative look in her silver-gray eyes and a smile on her lips, gazing at Rowdy Jim. Then she said, "Sure, sure," as though she had made up her mind to something. "Sorry I bothered you, Mr. Kane," she added, with not much sincerity. She turned away.

Rowdy Jim said, "Wait—"

He started to rise, but Flo caught one of his arms and Lou the other. They kept him prisoner. Tracy Mason strode across the room, but not unnoticed. A burly roughneck named Hogan, a Globe-Pete man, grabbed at her as she passed his table. Hogan was grinning, and he said loudly, "Sweetheart, I don't like your clothes but I sure like what's in them. Now you and me could—"

The quirt slashed Hogan across the face.

He let out a yelp of pain, but he didn't let loose of the girl.

Rowdy Jim broke free and rushed at Hogan.

Such a party had to end sooner or later in a brawl. That was inevitable. Hogan was a fighter, and most of the crowd were, like him, Globe-Pete men. One man yelled a warning at Hogan, another thrust out a foot and tripped Rowdy Jim. Somebody flung an oath and a bottle at the tripper. Rowdy Jim didn't fall, but he staggered. And Hogan, jumping up, caught him under the chin with a hard knee. Rowdy Jim went down, his vision blurred. He wrapped his arms around Hogan's legs, however, and spilled him over backwards.

A table and a chair and the girl, Tracy Mason, went toppling over with Hogan. The girl sat down hard, looking outraged. It was bedlam from that moment on, with men yelling and swearing and swinging hard fists. Rowdy Jim had a swirling glimpse of the riot as he picked himself up. He started toward the girl, but two men he hadn't noticed before were ahead of him. Like Tracy, they were dressed in range clothes. They had come with her but had waited in the dining-room doorway until now. One helped her rise, the other laid a six-shooter barrel roughly across Hogan's head.

A chair wielded like a club crashed down upon Rowdy Jim.

Pain exploded in him. His knees buckled, and he fell to the floor again. There was a burst of brilliant light which faded abruptly, and he saw nothing at all. The blackness into which he sank was extremely peaceful. . . .

Rowdy Jim came to in a rubbish-littered alleyway that ran beside the National House. He was alone, so far as he could tell in the darkness, and he had no idea how he had gotten there. No doubt the hotel management had dumped him on that spot. He sat up, groaned, held his head in his hands. His skull felt as if it had been split open. He probed gently, found an enormous bump but nothing worse. Memory returned. It had been a lively brawl, if short-lived for him. Jim wondered about the girl, and was surprised that he should be concerned about her.

She had gotten out of it unharmed, he was sure. The two cowhands would have seen to that. They'd been armed, as cowhands always were, and the one at least hadn't been timid about using his gun.

Jim picked himself up, stood swaying. A wave of sickness swept through him, and went away. His head continued to throb. He started walking on wobbly legs. Gaining the street, he found it no different from any night after midnight. The brawl in the hotel dining-room had created no sensation, and

the people who had participated in it had gone their way. None of the people on the street wasted so much as a glance on Rowdy Jim.

He angled across the street to the watering trough in front of the feed store, and ducked his head. The shock of the cold water cleared the cobwebby feeling from his mind, eased the pain in his head momentarily. He squeezed the water from his hair, went to the store doorway and sat on the step.

He thought of his money then, and gave a start. Even before feeling in his pockets, he knew that he had been robbed. Rowdy Jim swore under his breath, and the next moment chuckled. It has been quite a party, although it hadn't been worth five thousand dollars. Still, he wouldn't shed any tears over the money. It wasn't the first time he'd been cleaned out in a hurry.

He found a cigar in his pocket, and it was only slightly damaged. He lighted it, and went through his pockets again. A couple dollars in change. He had that much out of his five-thousand dollars. And he'd paid a week in advance for room and board at Mrs. Gregory's. Jim stood up, steadier now, and headed for the rooming-house.

II

JIM awoke in the morning without feeling at all rowdy. He had a dull headache that two cups of black coffee at breakfast failed to help. He also had a memory of a girl with silver-gray eyes that he couldn't get rid of.

He was back in work clothes, and he had to think of landing another drilling contract. That made him think of the girl again. He recalled her name after a time: Tracy Mason.

He'd never made hole for a girl, and it seemed like an opportunity that wouldn't come again in a lifetime. He wondered where he could find her. He left the house to look for her, and he was lucky enough to come upon a rancher dismounting before Naylor & Dunn's general store.

"Tracy Mason?" the rancher said, in reply to Jim's question. "Sure, I know Tracy. She has M7 Ranch. Her pa was Sam Mason, a Texas man. Knew Sam well. No better cowman anywhere. Died about a year ago. Sam came to Arizona back in—"

"The girl," Jim broke in. "Where can I find her?"

"Well, her M7 spread is north of the Hatchet Hills."

"Thanks," Jim said and drifted before the rancher could get long-winded again.

He went to McDade's Corral at the east end of town, and told the liveryman, "I want a rig. Got to drive to M7 Ranch. You know how to get there?"

McDade told him to follow the north road for about five miles to where it forked. The east branch road would take Jim to M7 Ranch. McDade yelled for his hostler, and shortly Jim was driving a horse and buggy away from Espada. The road cut across flat country for some miles, then wound through the Hatchets, which were low sage hills sprouting an occasional clump of piñions. Beyond was cattle range, and not an oil derrick in sight. It was peaceful looking country, and even Rowdy Jim Kane, who loved the shape of a derrick against the sky, reflected that it would be a shame if this range were ever blighted by a swarm of oil field workers.

He came to the fork finally and took the east branch. The road led through more hills and finally brought him to some log ranch buildings. Smoke curled lazily from the stone chimney of the ranch house. The girl, in men's clothing, appeared at the door. Jim wondered what she would be like properly dressed. She'd be a looker, he decided as he reined in his horse.

Tracy came to greet him, saying in her blunt way, "I didn't expect to see you so soon, Kane." Her lips weren't smiling, but her eyes seemed to be. And they were, as he'd thought last night, silver colored. "What happened? Did you squander all that money so soon?"

"I did some thinking about you," Jim said, stepping down from the buggy. "You were so worked up about having a well drilled that I figured I should give you a hand."

"Then you're not ready to work because you're broke?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I was broke," he said cheerfully.

Tracy's lips smiled now. "It was some party you threw last night," she told him. "A new experience for me."

"Just so you weren't hurt."

"Not even a scratch."

Jim eyed her warily, wondering what amused her. He was beginning to wish he hadn't rushed out here. She would think him too eager. He said, trying to show a lack of eagerness, "It depends on how soon you want me to start drilling. If you're in a hurry, maybe you'd better find somebody else. I can give you the names of a couple drillers. Maybe one will be looking for a job."

Tracy shook her head. "I asked around Espada," she said. "There is none available right now."

"Well, maybe we can do business."

"Maybe we can," said Tracy. "But I'm in a hurry."

"All right. Where's your lease, in the Espada field?"

"No lease."

"What?"

Tracy nodded. "I've got no lease," she told him. "I want a well drilled on M7 range. A discovery well." She didn't look at all amused now, but rather grim. "I want to strike oil here," she went on, her voice thick with emotion. "I want to bring in a gusher. In plain words, Kane, I want you to make me rich—outrageously rich!"

SOMETIMES Rowdy Jim Kane thought that everybody in the world, except himself, wanted to be rich. But he was shocked by Tracy Mason's admitting that she was like everybody else—and being so earnest about it. Jim looked around the ranchyard. Solid though not attractive buildings. A corral containing horses. A clearwater stream around back, shaded by cottonwood trees. He looked out across M7 range. Rimmed by low hills, it extended northward farther than the eye could reach. Whiteface cattle grazed in scattered bunches. It was idyllic, or something. Too good to spoil, just to get rich, outrageously rich, on oil. He'd seen what oil had done to other ranches—and to other people. It hadn't been nice.

He looked back at the girl. "Why?" he asked. "Why spoil all this?"

"I've a reason. It needn't concern you."

"You've got everything here," said Jim, genuinely bewildered.

"Sure, the way it looks to you," Tracy replied. "But you're not a cowman. Besides, nobody can judge a range at a glance." She made an impatient gesture. "Let's talk oil, Kane."

Jim shrugged. "All right. What makes you think there is oil under your range? It's a long way from the Espada field."

In a way, he was hoping there wasn't oil here.

He wanted to save Tracy Mason from her own greed, for he was beginning to like her a lot. But he saw the calculating look in her eyes, and knew that she had reason to believe there was oil here. She was realistic, not a dreamer.

Tracy said, "I don't just think there's oil, I know it. I'll show you, Kane." She left him abruptly, going to the corral where she roped and saddled a mount, a pinto pony, as expertly as any cowhand. Mounted, she called to him, "It's not far. You can drive there."

He got back into the buggy, and they headed east across the range. After perhaps a mile they left the bunch-grass flats behind and came to a hollow that was mostly sand and rocks. Jim had some trouble getting his rig through, for the boulders increased in size and number, and finally Tracy said, "You'll have to make it afoot from here."

He climbed out and walked beside the pinto, and shortly they came to a mesquite thicket and, beyond the brush, a grass-fringed little stream. Tracy dismounted, and approaching the creek she picked up a long, slender pole that lay at the water's edge, and thrust it into the gravelly creek bottom. When she withdrew the pole, she said, "Watch," and Jim felt a sudden excitement course through him.

A black, greasy substance oozed sluggishly from the hole in the creek bottom. Jim had seen such seepages before at other locations, and often such a surface flow marked a worth-while oil pool at not too great a depth.

He tried not to be too enthusiastic. "It could be," he said.

"It is," Tracy said. "All I need is a well."

"You showed this to any oil men?"

"No."

"You just discover it?"

The girl shook her head. "I've known about it for years," she said. "My father found it, when he first settled here. When there's no water here during the dry season, the grease oozes out of its own accord and forms a little pool. Kane, I want that oil."

Jim nodded. "All right," he said. "But there's one angle you maybe don't know about. It'll take money. You'll have to get a contractor to build a derrick before I can start drilling. We'll need pipe and—" He hesitated. "Don't worry about the pipe just yet. My credit is good. I can handle the drilling, and get the well casing put in. But even with this seepage, we may have to drill down a thousand feet or more and then it'll take money."

"How much money?"

"It could run high into the thousands."

"Oh," said Tracy and suddenly looked worried.

"I'm being honest with you, too honest for my own good," Jim said. He gave her a rueful smile. "I could make a deal with you that would cut me in on this discovery—if it's any good. Force you to take me in as a partner, maybe. But I'll play square with you. Tracy, your best bet is to make a deal with a big oil company like Globe-Pete."

"I'll take a chance on you, Kane."

"It's a deal."

"How soon will you start drilling?"

"As soon as the derrick is up," Jim told her. "I'll see a contractor about putting one up, soon as I get back to town. You'll have to talk money with him, when he comes out here. And I'll tell you my terms before I start making hole. That all right with you?"

TRACY nodded. "I want things done businesslike," she said. Then the excited look that had been in her eyes ever since showing Jim the oil sign was replaced by a certain grimness. "There's just one thing more, Kane."

"Yeah?"

"Don't try to doublecross me," Tracy said bluntly. "I'm not just a helpless woman. I've been running this ranch for a whole year, and before that I learned plenty from my father. I'm not easily outsmarted. And if things ever get too rough for me— Well, I'm not entirely alone." Her gaze went beyond Jim.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw two horsemen approaching. They were the two men who had come to the National House dining-room with her last night. A tough-looking pair. He saw what the girl meant when she warned him not to doublecross her.

One rider was a leathery-faced oldtimer. He looked boot tough, and there was a definite shrewdness in his pale blue eyes. The other was a Mexican, much younger but no less tough in appearance. They had rifles on their saddles and six-shooters at their thighs. Oil field workers were a rowdy lot, but when there was trouble they handled it with their fists. At worst, a driller or a roughneck might use a wrench or some other handy tool in a fight, but seldom if ever did one use a gun. Cowhands were different. Jim Kane knew that a cowhand felt undressed if he wasn't wearing a gun-rig. And these M7 riders looked as though they would make use of their guns without much urging.

They reined in, eyeing Jim without much friendliness.

The old man spat, with a show of contempt, and the Mexican sort of sneered as he took out the makings and started rolling a cigarette. Tracy introduced them. Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez. The old-timer nodded briefly in acknowledging the introduction, and the Mexican grinned, still without friendliness.

"You come to terms with this hombre?" Monahan asked the girl.

"He's going to drill a well for me," Tracy said.

"Yeah?"

"He thinks the oil sign is good."

Ben Monahan said, "Yeah?" again. Then he looked at Jim once more, and growled, "He better not be wrong." He lifted his

reins, turned his horse, rode slowly away. Miguel Gomez lighted his cigarette, smiled, said, "No, Señor; it will be better if you are not wrong," and rode after Monahan. Neither man hurried his horse.

Jim looked after them uneasily. "Nice boys," he said. "Very friendly. What happens if I drill all the way to China without finding oil?"

Tracy said, "Don't worry about that just yet, Kane."

She didn't even smile when she said it.

Jim Kane wondered what he had let himself in for as he drove away from M7 Ranch. The girl was wild to strike oil, to become rich, and those two gun-toting watchdogs of hers were sure set on seeing that she got what she wanted. A wildcat driller didn't lead a trouble-free existence, but it seemed that Rowdy Jim Kane was maneuvering himself into a tight corner. He had nobody to blame but himself, either. He wasn't satisfied to make hole for shoestring operators and shady promoters. He had to make a deal with a girl who was obsessed with the idea of becoming rich. Jim was beginning to wonder just what he was getting into, for he had a hunch that Tracy Mason's wanting to make a fortune in oil wasn't ordinary greed.

Jim told himself: You can still back out, Rowdy.

Sure, he could. But he wouldn't, and he knew it. He'd fallen for that ranch girl, fallen hard. He didn't like it much, for a girl like Tracy Mason wasn't another Flo or Lou. Her kind played for keeps. Let her get interested in a man, and she'd begin to dream of wedding bells. . . . Not that Rowdy Jim Kane had anything against marriage. It was fine—for some men. But he liked his freedom.

He told himself: Better back out while there's still time, Rowdy. But he kept thinking of Tracy. She was just what he had been looking for all his life—without knowing it.

III

HE'D SEE Ed Bateman, the contractor who had built the derrick for his test well out at Arroyo Blanco. Ed was busy, now that a new field was being opened out there; but he owed Rowdy Jim Kane a favor or two. Tomorrow he'd move his rig out to M7, overhaul it and start setting it up. He'd bring in a gusher for Tracy, sure, and then she'd owe him a favor or two.

Jim turned the horse and buggy in at the livery barn, and told McDade to carry the charge on his books until another day. The liveryman didn't object. As Jim had told Tracy, his credit was good.

FRESH AIR FIEND

THE Texan had not been feeling well. The first chance he had, he went to town for a physical checkup. After it was over, the doctor said, "You have a little lung trouble. Could you arrange to sleep outdoors?"

"Wa-al," drawled the cowpuncher, "I been sleepin' under the chuck wagon all summer, but I reckon I could kick a couple of spokes outa the wheels."

—E. J. RITTER JR.

There had been nobody outside the stable when Jim drove in, but now, as he left, he found Mike Hogan and four other Globe-Pete workers there.

Hogan had an ugly bruise on the left side of his face; the mark of old Ben Monahan's six-shooter, Jim supposed. A burly man, Hogan also looked as if he was in a bad humor. He was scowling as he stepped in front of Jim.

"Listen, Kane—" he began.

Jim looked beyond the man. The four other Globe-Pete men were casually circling so that they could jump him from the rear if there was trouble between him and Hogan. Jim looked back at Hogan.

"What's on your mind, Mike?"

"The girl."

"What girl?"

"Don't play dumb," Hogan growled. "The girl who started that fight last night. The one you just came back from seeing." He tapped a stiff forefinger against Jim's chest. "Stay away from her, Kane. Stay away from that ranch of hers."

"Who says so?"

"I say so."

Jim nodded. "I hear you saying the words," he said, his temper growing short, "but who put them into your mouth?"

Hogan's lips pulled back from his teeth in an ugly grimace. "Like I figured, boys," he said loudly. "He just won't take a warning. He'll have to be shown. Let him have it."

The odds against Kane were too great. The first blow caught him from behind, at the base of the skull, and staggered him. As he reeled, dizzy with pain, Hogan's men assailed him with a barrage of blows. They beat him to his knees, knocked him sprawling on his face, and gave him a dozen hard kicks before they quit.

He lay there dazed by pain, heard Mike Hogan say contemptuously, "Rowdy Jim Kane . . . he ain't so damn' rowdy now!"

Jim was lifted and helped into the stable by McDade and his hostler. They eased him down upon some sacks of grain, and the liveryman brought a bottle of whisky from his office and dosed Jim with it. He sat up presently, full of pain and rage, and cursed Mike Hogan. Suddenly it occurred to him that Hogan must have been carrying out orders, and that those orders must have come from someone higher up in Globe-Pete.

Somebody wanted him to stay away from Tracy Mason. That somebody wasn't just satisfied with warning him to stay away from the girl, but had ordered him roughed up to discourage him and to let him know that something worse would happen to him if he persisted in seeing her.

Why?

Jim could see but one reason for it. Somebody besides the girl, her two riders, and himself had seen the oil sign at M7 Ranch and didn't want some wildcatter like Rowdy Jim Kane horning in on it.

Jim got up off the grain sacks, stood swaying.

McDade said anxiously, "Better take it easy for a little while, Jim." He was a fat man, and violence unnerved him. "Those Globe-Pete men weren't fooling. If I were you, friend, I'd steer clear of that outfit from now on."

Jim said, "I'm just getting ready to tackle that outfit," and walked unsteadily from the livery stable.

He saw nothing of Hogan and his companions, but there were plenty of other signs of Globe-Pete to keep his rage well fueled. The Globe Petroleum Company dominated the Espada field. Its mule-drawn wagons clogged the street; they were loaded with machinery and pipe and tools, and bound for the development south of town. The company had a big warehouse and wagon yard back from the main street, and an office building facing the street.

Jim headed for the office building.

A FANCY carriage with a pair of handsome grays in harness and a colored man in livery holding the reins stood before the building. It was Dan Marlowe's rig, and old Dan, another coal-oil Johnny, was the big boss of Globe-Pete.

Jim strode into the front office, where a dozen pale-faced clerks worked at desks, behind a railed enclosure. One of the men jumped up to intercept Jim when he made

for the gate in the railing.

"Something I can do for you, sir?" he quavered.

Jim shoved the gate open, the man aside, and said sourly, "Not you. Dan Marlowe."

The office worker protested. "Mister Marlowe is not in, sir!"

Jim ignored that, strode to the door of Marlowe's private office and thrust it open. The office was empty. There were other doors to other private offices. Jim picked the nearest. A neatly lettered sign on it read: *Cole Avery, Superintendent.* Jim didn't knock on this door either. As the office force watched him with something like shock, he barged into Avery's office and slammed the door behind him.

Dan Marlowe wasn't there with Globe-Pete's handsome superintendent, but Dan's daughter, Louise, was—and intimately. The girl was in Avery's arms when the door slammed. She withdrew, not too hastily, from the embrace and smiled without embarrassment. Cole Avery looked somewhat flustered, however, and then angry.

He started toward Jim Kane, demanding, "What's the idea coming in here like that?" The ugly look of rage on Jim's fist-marked face halted him. And he said, more calmly, "What's wrong, Kane?"

"You don't know?"

"I? How should I know?"

"You don't know about Mike Hogan and some other Globe-Pete men jumping me?" Jim demanded. Then he realized that Avery wasn't likely to know. The man had a high-sounding title, but he wasn't a genuine oil man and so was more or less a figurehead. "Where's Dan Marlowe?" Jim asked, more calmly.

"On a trip to California," Avery replied. "He left on the morning stage. What do you want to see him about? What's all this about Mike Hogan?"

"Somebody gave Hogan orders to give me a working over," Jim said sourly. "So I wouldn't drill a test hole where that somebody doesn't want one drilled. I've a hunch that somebody is Dan Marlowe."

"Nonsense. Dan wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't he, though? Listen, Avery, I know that old blackleg!"

"Blackleg? Now see here, Kane—"

Louise Marlowe laughed. "Never mind, Cole," she said. "Dan Marlowe has been called 'blackleg' before—and worse."

She stood by the window behind the desk now, a very attractive girl dressed in the height of fashion. She was a tawny blonde with green-flecked gray eyes and a provocative mouth. It was possible to see old Dan Marlowe in her. She had the same self-assurance, but in her Dan's blunt arrogance had been refined to subtlety. Strong-willed was the word for the Marlowes.

Louise said, gazing amusedly at Jim, "I suppose you were simply given a warning not to do any wildcat drilling on some lease for which Dan is dickering."

Jim shook his head. "He's not dickering for this lease," he said. "If he tries, he won't get it." He looked back at Cole Avery. "You're Marlowe's lease man around here. You ought to know if he's out to grab this new field."

Avery didn't reply at once. He was busy lighting a cigar. He was a tall man of about thirty, handsome, well tailored and well groomed. He was the perfect picture of a young executive on his way up, and he'd come a long way since the opening of the Espada field six months ago. Jim Kane had heard that Avery had owned and operated a general store in Espada when it was but a cowtown, and that he had bought up a lot of leases—with Globe-Pete money—when oil was discovered. In gratitude for his acting as a front for the big outfit during the scramble for leases, Dan Marlowe had given Avery a big-paying job and a high-sounding title. Gossip had it that Dan's daughter, taking an even greater interest in the man, was responsible for the oil baron's lavishness. At any rate, Avery was now a big man in Espada. He was playing the part now, lighting his cigar and looking gravely thoughtful.

He said, "What new field is this, Kane? Arroyo Blanco?"

"No. I'm through out there."

"Well, what other field is there?"

JIM hesitated a moment, then decided that Tracy Mason's secret was already known. "Up at M7 Ranch," he said. "Plenty

of oil sign. The ranch is owned by a girl, and she's made a deal with me to sink a test well. If Dan Marlowe figures he can strong-arm her into cutting Globe-Pete in, he's going to get the surprise of his life. Tell him that."

"I don't know a thing about it," Avery said.

"Tell me," said Louise, moving toward Jim. "Is M7 Ranch's girl owner named Tracy Mason?" She smiled mysteriously when Jim nodded. "I rather thought so," she said, then turned to Avery. Her voice took on a sharp edge of mockery, saying, "I didn't suspect there was oil on Miss Mason's land. Did you, darling?"

"No," he replied. "Of course not."

It was doubtful if Louise heard. She was walking out of the office. The door slammed behind her, showing that she was peeved about something.

Jim said, "Maybe you don't know anything about what's going on, Avery. But I'm giving you warning for Dan Marlowe and the whole blamed Globe-Pete outfit. There's going to be real trouble if anybody tries to interfere with my drilling at M7 Ranch!"

Avery smiled faintly. "I'll tell Dan when he returns," he said. "I'm sure, Kane, that your warning will make him shake in his boots."

"Funny," Jim retorted. "Very funny." He, too, slammed the door when he went out.

The carriage was still standing before the building, the girl now seated in it and holding a pretty parasol to keep the sun off her. She beckoned to Jim, and said, when he stood beside the rig, "Will you take my word for something, Kane?"

"Should I?"

"I've no reason to lie to you."

"None but to shield that blackleg father of yours."

"He doesn't need me to shield him," Louise said coldly. "Dan Marlowe isn't afraid of anything on earth."

"All right. I'll take your word."

"Good. Dan doesn't know that there's oil at M7 Ranch."

"Then, who—"

She didn't answer. She said, "Take me home, Henry," and the colored driver started his team, whisked her away from there.

Jim stared after the carriage, a scowl on his bruised face. He didn't know what to make of the girl. She wanted him to believe her father hadn't ordered Mike Hogan to give him that beating, had claimed that Dan Marlowe was unaware of the oil sign at M7 Ranch. And she certainly knew that by clearing her father, she was causing Jim's suspicions to be directed at Cole Avery.

Avery? Jim shook his head, doubting that it had been Globe-Pete's superintendent. Louise would have tried to shield him, if she thought he would be suspected, just as she had shielded Dan Marlowe. A woman didn't let a man hold her in his arms one minute and the next betray him, unwittingly or otherwise. Louise wouldn't have blundered like that. Dan Marlowe had raised a clever daughter, a very clever daughter.

There was only one explanation, Jim decided. The girl didn't know that Dan Marlowe knew about the oil sign at M7 Ranch.

He shrugged. It didn't matter. When he happened upon Mike Hogan again, he would find out who had given him his orders. Somebody was going to pay for that beating, and it wouldn't be Mike Hogan alone.

Jim headed for Ed Bateman's place to talk to the contractor about building the derrick at M7 Ranch. . . .

MINDFUL that he owed Rowdy Jim Kane a favor or two, Ed Bateman said he was willing to take on the job. He promised to drive up to M7 Ranch to discuss the contract with Tracy Mason, adding, "I'll see her first thing tomorrow, Rowdy." He was a grizzled old-timer, and he gave Jim a shrewd look as he said, "I'll give her a break on the cost, to help you along."

Jim laughed, said, "Thanks, Ed," and went out.

He got a ride out to Arroyo Blanco on a freight wagon that was hauling casing to the new discovery for Globe-Pete. The test well Jim had drilled out there on the sand flats had been on a lease owned by a speculator named Hayden who had made a deal with Dan Marlowe even before the gusher

was capped. Globe-Pete was losing no time in developing the Arroyo Blanco field, and since the oil company favored a big drilling outfit, Jim had been squeezed out. Besides the one for the test well, two new derricks were already completed and three more abuilding.

A camp of tents and shacks had sprung up, and more than three hundred men were busy at work. There was a jam-up of big freight wagons waiting to be unloaded of materials, supplies, machinery, provisions. The ground for a mile around the test well, now called Arroyo Blanco Number One, was greasy black from the gusher that had spurted for three days before being brought under control and spudded down, a flow the wildly excited Hayden had estimated at twenty thousand barrels a day.

Jim's rig had been dismantled and stood idle and forlorn looking in the midst of all the activity. It was partly cleaned up, and Hank Boland, who was Jim's tool dresser, was still working halfheartedly at ridding the machinery of oil slick. The three men Jim had left with Hank were not in sight.

"Where are your helpers, Hank?"

"Take a guess, Rowdy."

"Globe-Pete hired them away?"

"Yeah," said Pete, and fished his pipe from his pocket. "Offered me a job, too. If I had any sense, I'd take it."

Jim grinned at him. They'd been together for years, more partners than boss and employee. Both were too easy going by nature, too independent of spirit, to work for a big outfit. Regular wages appealed to most men, but Rowdy Jim Kane and Hank Boland willingly exchanged a sense of security for freedom. Financially, they came out ahead of the drillers who held down the steady jobs. Jim usually paid Hank a bonus once a job was finished. He had no fear that the tool dresser would quit him.

Hank leaned against the donkey engine, chewed on the stem of his cold pipe. He was a lanky, lazy man, dour of face. "It kind of gets me, Rowdy," he said. "We bring in a gusher, open a new field, and then get the bum's rush. That Hayden will make a fortune in royalties, and Globe-Pete will grow fatter. Everybody getting rich but you and me. I've been thinking—"

Jim broke in. "You lose your money at blackjack again, Hank?"

Hank looked sheepish. "Don't I always?" he asked. Then he said, "I've sworn off, Rowdy, and I mean it. I'm going to save my money from now on. I'm going to buy me some oil stock and—"

"That's a gamble too, Hank. Riskier than blackjack."

"Not if you buy Globe-Pete stock."

"You could be right. Well, I wish you luck."

Hank said, "Thanks. But you better get smart, too, Rowdy. I'm twice your age, sure. But one of these days you'll wake up and wish you hadn't let opportunity slip through your fingers. Like me, you'll wish you'd held onto your money instead of throwing it away on having a so-called good time. Maybe you'll meet a girl and want to marry her and settle down. Who can tell?"

Jim was beginning to understand what ailed Hank. Off and on for years the man had been talking about marrying a widow he'd met back in Texas, talking about it mostly when he was broke.

Jim said, "You get another letter from Mollie, Hank?"

"Yeah. Yesterday," Hank said gloomily. "You know, Rowdy, I ain't playing fair with her. There she is, waiting for me all this time, and I'm not any more able to support a wife now than I ever was."

"Worry no longer, partner," Rowdy Jim Kane said cheerfully. "A few months from now you'll be able to marry the widow in style. We're going to open a new field and we're going to cut ourselves in on it."

"A new job already? You broke, Rowdy?"

"Flat broke."

"What happened?"

It was Jim who looked sheepish now. "I was having me a time," he said. "The party ended up in a fight. I came to in an alley, with my money gone. I don't have any idea who picked my pocket. It was just money, anyway. And besides, I got this new job right away. If it's as good as it looks, we'll end up as oil barons."

Hank merely grunted, then said none too hopefully, "Since you're broke, you might

as well pitch in and help overhaul the rig."

Jim nodded. "That's what I'm here for," he said cheerfully.

IV

THREE DAYS later Rowdy Jim Kane took advantage once more of his good credit standing. He had a freighting firm send two big wagons to load his drilling rig for the trip to M7 Ranch. He went to town, made a deal for some well casing to be delivered, on credit, at the ranch. Then he went around to Mrs. Gregory's rooming house, washed up and changed clothes, and, after surveying himself in the mirror and seeing that the bruises were fading, set out for McDade's Corral.

He hired a mount instead of a rig this time, anxious to show Tracy Mason that he, too, could ride. It was sundown when he reached M7 headquarters, and he hoped Tracy would invite him to stay to supper. There was a buckboard and team standing before the ranchhouse, and as Jim crossed the yard he saw its owner come from the house. It was a jolt for Rowdy Jim.

The man was Cole Avery.

Jim's first thought was that Tracy had crossed him up, made a deal with Avery and Globe-Pete. Then he saw the wild look of rage on the man's face and knew he'd guessed wrong.

Avery must have been blinded by his anger; at least he gave no sign that he saw Jim. The Globe-Pete man strode to the buckboard, climbed to the seat, grabbed loose the reins from the whipstock, yelled at the team, and drove away fast.

Jim dismounted, walked to the open door, paused there upon hearing the sound of a woman weeping. He was surprised; Tracy was such a spirited girl that he had never imagined her giving way to tears.

It was a moment before his eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the room after the bright sunlight. She was seated at a table, her face buried in her arms. After a moment she became aware of him. She straightened, stifled her sobs. Little girl fashion, she wiped away tears with the sleeve of her shirt. She rose and faced him, but avoided meeting his questioning gaze.

"What goes on here?" Jim demanded. "What's Avery done to you?"

"It's nothing, really."

"Nothing, you say. But the way you were crying—" He broke off, frowning. Then he said, "I'm beginning to catch on. You told me that no outsiders knew about the oil sign at Brenoso Creek. Globe-Pete knew about it—or at least Avery did. His outfit had a bunch of hardcases jump me. I was told not to drill here, and then they roughed me up to make the order stick. I figured that Dan Marlowe had given them their orders, but now it looks as though that dude, Cole Avery, is my man. Dan Marlowe's daughter is stuck on Avery and you—"

"No!" Tracy cried. "It—it's not so!"

"Avery owned a store in Espada before the oil strike," he went on, shouting angrily. "You knew him then, before he became friendly with the Marlowe girl. You were in love with him."

He was hurting her. Tracy was crying again, silently, but letting the tears course down her cheeks. Jim held his tongue, sorry he had been so harsh with her.

"It's true," Tracy said thickly. "I may as well admit it. I was in love with Cole, and he —Well, I thought it was understood that we were to be married one day. Then an oil prospector found oil sign south of Espada, and Dan Marlowe approached Cole. Mr. Marlowe knew that a man like Cole could get oil leases at a better price than a man openly representing a big company like Globe-Pete. All at once Cole changed. He became greedy with ambition. He sold his store, took a job with Globe-Pete, and—and then he met Louise Marlowe."

Jim didn't say anything.

Tracy went on, "He came here today, the first time since he met her, to make me an offer. I'd forgotten that he knew about the oil sign at Brenoso Creek. Perhaps he'd forgotten it, too, until he learned that I was looking for someone to drill a test well."

"He wanted you to break with me and deal with Globe-Pete?"

"No. He wanted me to lease Brenoso Creek to him."

"So he's doublecrossing his outfit?" Jim

said. He didn't wait for her to answer that. "He lost his temper when you turned him down, eh?"

SHE nodded. "When I told him I wouldn't lease my land to anyone, he suggested that I take him in as a partner. He offered to form a corporation and sell stock, so there would be money—other people's money—to meet expenses. I told him I didn't want him for a partner, that I wouldn't have him for a partner even if I would go back on my word to you. I—I told him that I'd show him he wasn't the only one who could get rich."

"So that's it," Jim said. "Avery jilted you because he had a chance with a rich man's daughter. Now you hope to get rich, so that you have a kind of revenge."

"No!"

"What, then?"

Tracy dried her tears again. She gave her head a defiant toss. "I'm done with him, entirely done with him," she said. "I was crying for—well, for what might have been. Not because I still want him. He's not worth crying over, a man like that."

Jim didn't believe that. Cole Avery was attractive to women; it wasn't likely that this girl had gotten over him. It was more than likely that she still hoped to win him back. She wanted to strike it rich in oil to take Avery away from Louise Marlowe, and she had refused the deal he'd offered only because pride wouldn't let her appear too eager. Jim didn't like it.

"You don't believe me?" Tracy asked.

"I think you and I had better talk business," he replied. "I don't want to come out on the short end of this deal. I was paid five thousand dollars above my expenses for bringing in that well at Arroyo Blanco. You can't guarantee me any money, and there's a chance that we won't strike oil here. But if we do, I want to be protected. A ten per cent partnership will make me as rich as I want to be. Ten per cent for me, ninety for you, and you pay for the drilling. We'll put it in writing. We'll have a lawyer draw up an agreement."

"Jim, I give you my word that Avery has nothing to do with my wanting to strike oil."

"Maybe you think so at the moment."

"It's a much more important reason."

"All right," he said skeptically. "Tell me."

"I'll show you," she told him. "So you can believe me."

They rode across M7 range, traveling at an easy lope. They covered several miles, and to Rowdy Jim Kane, who was no cowman, it seemed that Tracy's ranch was a mighty big one. They came finally to an empty creek bed, and Tracy reined in. Jim looked at her curiously when she said, "What do you see?"

He looked about, saw nothing but a few scattered bunches of cattle.

Tracy said, "This arroyo, Jim." She pointed to the west, to the range of low hills there. The arroyo extended to a cut in the hills, a sandy gully twisting across the range. "Up until a few months ago," the girl explained, "this was a clearwater creek. It was a year-around supply of water for M7 Ranch, draining down from the San Juanitos. I depended on it. Then Espada boomed and needed a bigger water supply. The oil field needed water. So a dam was built up in the hills, and the water was piped south. And I was left with an arroyo."

"So what?" said Jim. "You've got other water."

"At the moment, yes," she replied. "But this is early spring. When summer comes, Brenoso Creek near my headquarters and the few water-holes will dry up. At the house I'll have to depend on the well, as I do every summer." She paused, and there was genuine worry in her eyes. "The range will be without water for three months at least, every year. You can't keep a single cow, let alone a couple thousand, without water. Do you understand now, Jim?" Tracy looked away.

He nodded. "I guess so. You want to get rid of your cattle before you're out of water, and so you need an oil well."

Tracy shook her head. "It's not that," she told him. "I was born on a ranch, and I've never lived anywhere but on a ranch. I couldn't imagine myself living in a town, or on land where there were no cattle." She smiled at him. "It's my way of life, Jim. Will you ride a little farther?"

IT WASN'T just a little farther, at least not to Jim Kane who was not used to riding horseback across miles of range. But at last, perhaps two hours later, they reined in atop a piñon-studded slope in the hills north of M7 range. Beyond was another range that extended on north in a vast sweep of grassland as far, and farther, as the eye could reach. Tracy had brought along field glasses, and now she handed them to Jim and pointed to a cluster of buildings in the distance. He focused the glasses, studied the buildings. A ranch headquarters, but such a one as seldom was seen on most southwest ranches. The buildings were big, freshly painted, well kept up, and numerous.

"Nice," Jim said.

He saw no cattle on the range, no riders, no activity about the ranch headquarters. He returned the glasses with a questioning look.

Tracy said, excitement in her voice, "It's the K Bar Ranch. A man named John Keith owns it. He's old, very old, and he's retired. He now lives in Phoenix, but he keeps his buildings in repair. When I lost the water from the San Juanitos, I was wild with worry. Then one day I rode up here—and got an idea. I went to see Mr. Keith, and asked him to lease me graze for my cattle. He refused, because he had recently decided to sell the K Bar. Well, I wasn't very practical, I suppose. But I said that I would buy it."

Jim gave her a surprised look. "He must have asked a fancy price."

Tracy nodded. "But a fair one," she said. "I paid him a thousand dollars for a three months' option, Jim. Now do you see why I must have an oil well? I've got to have K Bar Ranch, Jim, or sell off my herd. I've got to own it for my future, for my way of life. I need twenty-five thousand dollars before I can get a bank to take a mortgage, and I need it soon!"

Jim tired to hide his feelings, saying, "I savvy now, Tracy." He knew what she didn't know, that even when there were oil signs, a well was still a gamble. Even if a well was brought in at Brenoso Creek, it couldn't be turned into money until it was delivered to some far-off refinery. He was relieved to know that it wasn't greed that was behind her desire to strike oil; he was even more relieved that Cole Avery had nothing to do with it, though he wasn't yet ready to count the man out entirely. He said, "Oil is your only chance, then?"

"Yes, Jim," she said. "Without water, the M7 is worthless. I won't even be able to sell it. And I haven't money enough to buy K Bar or any other ranch. Oil is my only chance. You'll strike oil for me, won't you?"

Jim said, "Yes," no doubt tempering his promise. He wished that there was no doubt in his mind.

They rode back down to M7 range, Tracy talking about K Bar Ranch and Jim lost in bleak thought. It was fine, he reflected; she had a dream, and she wanted to make it come true. He hoped that it would come true. He thought that Tracy was different from any girl he had ever known, or would ever know. Yes, she was sort of wonderful, and he was falling in love with her. But a lot of good all this would do him. Jim thought he understood Tracy better than she understood herself.

She wanted K Bar, as she said, because ranch life was her way of life. Her happiness depended upon her having it. More than that, she was planning for the future, and certainly that meant, though she might not realize it, a husband and children. Cole Avery might be a part of her future, but surely Rowdy Jim Kane the wildcatter was not. Tracy was too different, much too different, for him.

They rode to Brenoso Creek where a crew of twenty Mexicans labored to open a road through the brush and rocks so that wagons

could get through. Ed Bateman had come to see Tracy, and it had been the contractor who had suggested the road. Miguel Gomez had recruited the workers.

"Mostly," Tracy said, smiling, "they are Miguel's relatives."

V

MIGUEL and old Ben Monahan weren't about, and Jim asked about them.

"They're driving a small bunch of steers north to Harbin," Tracy told him. "It's a bad time to market beef, for prices are pretty low. But—well, I've got to raise money to meet expenses here at the job."

"They're loyal to you, that pair."

"Yes. They've been here a long time."

"And they're another reason why you don't want to be forced out of the cattle business?"

"Yes," said Tracy. "Ben is too old to land another riding job, which is the only kind he wants, and Miguel never worked for another outfit." She watched the Mexicans, busy with picks and shovels. "About the contract, Jim. We'll go to town tomorrow and have a lawyer—"

"Forget it," Jim interrupted. "Your word is good enough for me."

That was evidence that he had fallen hard for Tracy Mason.

Ed Bateman arrived with his crew and wagons piled high with derrick timber the following morning. The grizzled old contractor supervised the start of the job, then, being a busy man, he left the crew in charge of a foreman. It was a start, but a derrick wasn't thrown up in a day and even after it jutted toward the Arizona sky, completed, it took more days for Jim and Hank Boland to set up the drilling. There was more work for the Mexicans, too; Jim put them to digging sump holes.

Tracy was there every day, impatient, forever asking Jim and Hank when they would start to make hole. She was talking oil-field lingo now. The day the rig started its noisy pounding she was as excited, Jim reflected, as a little girl with a brand-new doll.

He was excited, too. It was a fascinating game, driving a hole deep into the earth on the chance that it would bring in liquid black gold. And this time Rowdy Jim Kane himself had a stake in it.

This was the most important well he'd ever drilled. Always before he had not greatly cared whether or not he brought in a well; just drilling the hole had been enough, for he knew that he would get his money whether the hole turned out dry or a gusher. This time he was a partner, with a chance to make a fortune. But that alone didn't make the Brenoso test hole important. Rather, it was what it meant to Tracy.

The old boiler kept up the steam, the engine purred smoothly, the big walking beam banged, the greased cable driving the drill rose and fell steadily day after day.

The hole grew deeper. It went down through sand and clay, the string of tools struck rock and the going was slower. Too slow, considering that Tracy must have money—a lot of money—before the option she held on K Bar Ranch ran out. Tracy showed Jim a letter she had received from K Bar's owner. John Keith urged her not to let the opportunity slip through her fingers. He told her that someone else was now interested in buying K Bar, but, since he had once been her neighbor and also had known her father well, he wanted her to have the ranch. Tracy seemed worried.

Jim tried to reassure her, forcing himself to appear confident. He didn't tell her that the oil seepage in the creek might be a fluke, some trick of nature, and that the oil might lie far below the surface. He pushed the work as fast as was possible, having some of the Mexicans helping with the drilling. He put the others to digging more sump holes and banking them up high. He wanted to be ready in case the well came in a gusher; he wanted to waste no more oil than need be. If there was no gusher, if the well had to be pumped, the sump holes would serve as storage basins until the oil could be shipped out by tank wagon.

THE WELL went down five hundred, eight hundred, a thousand feet. There were delays, of course. Once a string of

tools was lost when the cable broke, and it took Jim and Hank the whole of a day to hook and fish the string out. In rock, the drill went off at a tangent and they had to use a reamer to straighten it out. Then at twelve hundred feet, Jim had to cut off the rig for lack of pipe for casing.

The supplier who had promised to furnish more pipe, on credit, failed to keep his word. Jim sent Tracy to town to see the man, and she returned with a worried look on her face. She had ridden hard. Her pinto pony was blowing and lathered, and the girl herself was breathless. She came running to the drilling platform as soon as she dismounted.

"Jim, Mr. Nolan isn't sending you any pipe!" she exclaimed. "I tried to make him give me a reason, and he kept hedging. Finally he said that he just couldn't fill your order unless you paid cash. Then, when I came from the bank with the money, he said that he simply wasn't able to fill your order. His excuse is that Globe-Pete has contracted for all the pipe in his warehouse, and for all that he expects to get delivery on during the next month or more. What'll we do, Jim?"

"Why," said Rowdy Jim, "I'll go to town and have a little talk with Steve Nolan."

"You think—"

"I know," Jim said. "I've been expecting Globe-Pete—or your friend Avery—to pull something like this. The idea, honey, is to shut us down and run up the cost of the drilling. If this hole can be made expensive enough— Well, it's an old trick in the oil game—making a wildcat operator squeal for help." He patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. I won't let them make you squeal, not without a fight."

He went to the creek to wash up, feeling none too confident.

A wildcatter hadn't much chance when bucked by a big outfit like Globe-Pete. There were a thousand ways such an outfit could strike a foul blow, and this casing pipe deal was but one of the least dirty.

He still had his livery stable horse there at the camp, and he saddled it. Tracy said, "I'll go with you, Jim."

"No," he told her firmly. "There may be a little trouble."

"Then let me send Ben and Miguel with you."

"No," he said, mounting. "That pair would go off half-cocked and make more trouble than I could take care of."

He rode away, leaving Tracy looking desperate. He was surprised that she scared so easily. . . .

STEVE NOLAN was a pudgy little man. He squirmed in his desk chair, in his cubbyhole office, and sweated profusely. "Don't lose your temper with me, Rowdy," he said. "I was willing to supply pipe, even on credit. Shucks, you and I were always friends. But Globe-Pete is my biggest customer. Without Globe-Pete I wouldn't be in business. I was forced to sign a contract with that outfit for all the pipe I had in stock and on order. I—"

"Who forced you?"

"Cole Avery. But Dan Marlowe's signature was on the contract."

"All right, Steve," Jim said. "I know they had you in a corner."

He left the supplier's office, went to the office building of the Globe Petroleum Company. He barged in past the clerks in the outer room, and this time found Dan Marlowe in his private office.

Marlowe was a big man with a florid face and a lot of silver in his hair and in his neatly trimmed mustache. He'd gotten into the oil game during its early days in Pennsylvania, and before that he'd been a coal miner. Now, at sixty, nicely tailored and well groomed, he didn't look as though he'd ever been close enough to mine or well to soil his hands.

He smiled broadly, his manner friendly, but when he rose he kept his desk between himself and his visitor. He knew Rowdy Jim Kane's kind. He saw the angry look on Rowdy Jim's face.

"I'm too old to brawl, Rowdy," he said hastily. "Let's talk it over. What's sticking in your craw, anyway?"

"Pipe casing, at the moment," Jim said, facing him across the desk. "You forced a contract on Steve Nolan to tie up all he's got, even though he promised to supply me with what I needed. I'm not taking that,

Dan. You don't need all that pipe at once. Later, maybe. But not right now. I want the pipe Nolan promised me."

"Business is business, Rowdy."

"And making war on a woman is business, eh?"

"You mean the Mason girl?"

"Who else?"

Marlowe took a cigar from the humidor on the desk, lighted it. He was frowning. "You'll have to take my word for this, Rowdy," he said slowly. "I know no more about Miss Mason that what my daughter told me. I understand from her that you are drilling a test well on the Mason ranch. I am not making war on the lady. I'm not interested in her wildcat operation. I've got my hands full with the Espada field and the new discovery at Arroyo Blanco. I give you my word of honor on that."

"What about tying up Nolan's supply of pipe?"

"My local superintendent suggested that."

"Avery?"

"Yes."

"And he had Globe-Pete's interest at heart?"

Marlowe considered a moment, studying Jim shrewdly. "He led me to believe so," he said. "He argued that the Arroyo Blanco field would take an enormous amount of pipe, and that it would be good business to have it contracted for. You're suggesting that Avery had another reason?"

"Right. He's tried to force Tracy Mason into a deal."

"A deal with Globe-Pete?"

"A deal with Cole Avery," Jim said flatly. "My word against his, sure—and he'll deny it. But you can question Tracy herself. He's using Globe-Pete to force her into a deal, Dan. The pipe contract is just one sneak trick he pulled. The day I agreed to drill at M7 Ranch, somebody had Mike Hogan and four other Globe-Pete men give me a beating and a warning to stay away from that ranch. I haven't run into Hogan since, but I will. And when I do, I'll make him tell who gave him his orders—Dan Marlowe or Cole Avery."

"It wasn't I, Rowdy," Marlowe said flatly. "And if it was Cole Avery—Well, prove that he's been using Globe-Pete to forward his own interests and—yes, damn it—I'll see that you get the pipe you need!"

Rowdy Jim grinned. "Call him in here," he said eagerly.

Marlowe went to the door, called to one of the clerks, and a moment later Cole Avery entered the office. In a way, Avery was a younger Dan Marlowe. At least, he was trying to model himself along the same lines. The imitation was good. His expensive gray suit matched the one the oil baron wore in material and styling. His manner was brusque. He moved with an aggressive air. He played the part well, but he still had a long way to go. To Rowdy Jim Kane he was just a fourflusher.

Avery ignored Jim. He faced his boss, and said, "You wanted to discuss something with me, Dan?"

"Rowdy here has a crow to pick with you," Marlowe said.

"Kane?" said Avery, slowly turning. "What about?"

Rowdy decided a bluff might do it. He said, "I just had a talk with Mike Hogan. He swears you gave him orders to rough me up and scare me off the M7 Ranch job."

VI

AVERY LOOKED jolted. But he recovered quickly enough, and said, "Hogan probably said words you put into his mouth, Kane. You and he have some personal grudge, and Hogan worked it off." He turned back to Marlowe. "There was some trouble between Kane and Hogan one night over the Mason girl, Dan. It happened during a party at the National House. There was a brawl when Hogan made advances to the girl. Kane took offense. Now he's blaming Hogan's getting even with him on Globe-Pete. No doubt to force us into granting him some concession, maybe on well-casing pipe. Kane plays a dirty game and—"

Jim swore, lost his temper, lunged at the man.

Avery surprised him. Side-stepping, he drove a fist hard to Jim's jaw and staggered him. Before Jim recovered, he moved to the desk and grabbed up a heavy glass decanter

from its tray. He wielded it like a club, aimin at Jim's head. Jim ducked, but took the blow on his left shoulder anyway. Glass shattered, water gushed. Pain knifed down Jim's arm to his finger tips. Avery never hesitated. He rushed, driving heavy punches to Jim's body. He drove the wildcat driller back against the wall, then grinned mockingly as he readied a knockout punch. Jim saw it coming, and knew a moment's fear. Then he jerked his head aside, and Avery's fist crashed against the wall.

Avery reeled away, hugging his hurt hand to his chest, and Jim, going after him, knew that he had won. He battered Avery with short, hard jabs until the man cried out, "Enough, Kane! Let up!"

Jim shoved him against the wall, poised his fist for another blow, and said savagely, "Who gave Hogan his orders?"

Avery flinched, and muttered, "I—I did."

Jim swung toward Dan Marlowe. "Well?" he demanded.

Marlowe nodded. "You'll get your pipe," he said. "And this doublecrosser is through at Globe-Pete."

Jim turned to the door. It was already open. Tracy stood there gazing at the beaten Cole Avery with a look of horror in her eyes.

Jim brushed past her, went out to the street. Tracy's pinto was outside. So were her two M7 riders. Old Ben Monahan was chewing a tobacco cud. Miguel Gomez was puffing on a brown-paper cigarette. They sat their horses and stared at Jim with silent hostility. Maybe it was personal or maybe they just didn't like any oil field workers.

Jim would have gone on to Nolan's warehouse where he had left his horse, but Tracy came from the Globe-Pete building and said, "One moment, Jim. I want to talk with you."

He faced her, frowning.

She was badly upset, sickened by what she had seen a minute ago. "Jim, if this is the way a person must make money in oil, I want out of it. I won't have people beaten because of me. I—"

Jim said angrily, "Sure, I had to whip Cole Avery to get the pipe we need. I show him up for the fourflusher he is, and that hurts." He was jealous and he understood that, but he couldn't help it. "All right, call it quits. Throw away your chance of owning K Bar. Or maybe you'd like to make a deal with Avery and—"

"I want out of it for good," Tracy broke in.

She meant it. Maybe she just hated violence, but Jim, in his anger, thought it was because Avery had gotten hurt and she, for all her denials, was still in love with the man.

OLD BEN MONAHAN said, "Tracy, you made a bargain with this hombre. You've got to keep it. Your pa made me promise when he was lying on his death bed to look out for you. He sure didn't mean for me just to protect you. He meant for me to see that you played it straight. You ain't backing out on this deal."

Tracy bit her lower lip, then said, "All right. I'll hold up my end of the bargain, but after what's happened I don't care if that hole stays as dry as it is right now."

She strode to her pony, mounted, rode away at a lope.

Jim looked after her bleakly, knowing that she meant what she had said. She didn't care now. Because Cole Avery had taken a beating, she didn't care. It looked as though Avery was more important than anything else to Tracy Mason.

Jim said to Ben Monahan, "Thanks, friend."

The old cowpuncher scowled. "Don't think I'm doing you any favors," he drawled. "I'm just looking out for the girl's interests." He patted the gun at his thigh. "She needs an oil well," he added. "You see that she gets one—or it'll be too bad."

"*Si*," murmured Miguel. "It will be too bad."

They swung their horses around, rode after the girl. . . .

The drilling went on after Steve Nolan, on authority received from Dan Marlowe, made delivery on the pipe for casing. It went on day after day, from gray dawn until hazy dusk and often by lantern light, with Rowdy Jim Kane and Hank Boland driving themselves and working double shifts.

They'd let most of the Mexicans go to save money for Tracy, and kept only the cook and three others to keep the boiler fired and the steam pressure up. But it was different now, for Tracy no longer came to the camp.

Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez rode up to the drilling once a day and sometimes twice. The cowhands watched the work without comment: Jim on the drilling platform, Hank up on the tower, the Mexicans toiling as roughnecks and becoming expert at it. They watched the steam engine chugging away, the walking beam moving rhythmically the cable rising and falling. They asked no questions, and Jim doubted that they reported to Tracy. He had a feeling that the girl just wasn't interested, and all because he had given Cole Avery a well deserved beating.

"That pair," Hank told Jim, "gives me the creeps. Never saying anything, just spying on us. And packing guns. They must figure we'll make off with the oil in our pockets when we bring this well in."

"Never mind," Jim said. "Forget them."

"What ails the girl, anyway? She never comes around nowadays."

"She wants to call it quits."

"Now? With us cutting through shale?"

Jim nodded gloomily. He hadn't told Hank about his falling out with Tracy, but did so now. Hank shook his head, bewildered, saying there was no figuring women. He was keeping a close watch on the tailings from the hole, and they were drilling through shale. It was a good sign. The oil-bearing sand should lie just below.

They hit sand two days later as the tailings showed, but there was no gusher. There was not even the slightest flow of oil, and Hank Boland said wearily, "We may as well shoot it, Rowdy. What do you say?"

Jim said, after considering a moment, "I'll go to town for the nitro." He noticed how done in Hank looked, and so told him to shut the rig down. "You and the Mexicans take it easy until we're ready to shoot it."

He washed up, changed clothes, then saddled his horse. He was just riding away from the camp when Ben Monahan appeared. The old cowhand reined in in front of Jim. He was scowling. "What's wrong now, hombre?" he demanded.

"Nothing is wrong," Jim retorted. He was losing his patience with this old rannihan. "You can tell your boss that we're going to bring in her well tomorrow."

"Yeah? Well, what's the idea of shutting down the rig today?"

"My business," Jim said, and suddenly crowded his horse in against Monahan's. He grabbed at the cowhand's six-shooter, jerked it from its holster, and grinned without humor. "Keep your hands off your rifle, old-timer," he ordered. He gestured with the captured gun. "I can handle this thing, if I have to. I just wanted to show you that I'm not scared of any gun-packing hombre who was maybe a bad man twenty years ago."

Ben Monahan scowled at him a moment longer, then grinned. It was a sheepish grin. Jim shoved the six-shooter back into the man's holster.

"Now that we understand each other," he said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We're down to oil-sand, but we've got to do something to start the oil flowing. We'll shoot the well with nitroglycerine."

"Supposing that doesn't start it?"

"It will. You can tell Tracy that tomorrow she'll be an oil princess."

"She won't care much," Monahan said. "I don't know what ails that girl, Jim. She keeps to the ranch house and hardly ever talks to Miguel and me. Mighty unhappy. I sure don't savvy her."

"She's all broken up about Cole Avery."

"Nope. It ain't that. She's got over that no-good."

"What's wrong with her, then?"

Ben Monahan gave Jim a shrewd look. "Maybe you could find out if you stop by the house and have a talk with her," he said, and abruptly rode on toward the idle drilling rig.

JIM DIDN'T stop at the ranch headquarters. He was sure that Tracy didn't want to see him. He was also sure that Ben Monahan was wrong about her. He'd changed his mind about Tracy Mason, Rowdy Jim had. She wasn't like the women he'd always known, the kind of women that

show up wherever a town is booming and there is plenty of easy money. Money didn't mean much to Tracy, and she was a one-man woman. She had fallen in love with Cole Avery, and though she might be through with him because he was no good, she would remain in love with him forever, Tracy was, Jim had come to realize, the sort of woman a man believed his mother to be and wanted his sister to be: faithful in her love, even if that love was a mistake.

It was dusk when he reached Espada, and he entered Steve Nolan's warehouse just as the supplier was about to close up for the day. Jim bought twelve quarts of nitroglycerine, a case of dynamite, and some fuse—on credit. He then turned his horse in at McDade's Corral, and hired a buckboard and team. He drove the rig around to Nolan's, and loaded the explosives onto it. Leaving the team tied to the warehouse loading platform, Jim went to a counter restaurant for supper.

After eating, he went to a saloon and listened to the talk of the oil field workers gathered there. It was mostly about the new Arroyo Blanco field. Jim told himself that soon he would have to pick up some contacts for future wildcat jobs, now that he was about through with the drilling at Brenoso Creek. A few acquaintances questioned him about the Brenoso Creek well, and, as was his fashion, he bragged a little, boasting that Brenoso Creek would be a bigger discovery than Arroyo Blanco. And he added, "We're going to shoot her tomorrow."

Rowdy Jim wasn't just bragging to impress the other oil men, however. He wanted word about the Brenoso Creek development to get around, to work up interest. He was well aware that if it shouldn't be much of a discovery—which was very possible—Tracy might have trouble cashing in on the strike. She would need financial help to get the oil to a refinery, and a deal with Globe-Pete would be her best bet. Jim wanted to get Dan Marlowe interested in Brenoso Creek, and it would be best if the oil baron was primed by gossip ahead of the time when Jim must approach him.

It was full dark when Jim left the saloon. He headed for his rig at Nolan's, passing the National House on the way. Louise Marlowe was just coming from the hotel. She called, "Oh, Rowdy—I've been wanting to see you!" She hurried toward him. Louise was as beautifully dressed as ever, but in the light from the hotel windows he saw that she was a little peaked and had dark smudges beneath her eyes. She wasn't smiling; rather she looked very unhappy and worried.

"Rowdy, will you tell me something?" she asked huskily. "Has Cole Avery been coming up to M7 Ranch to see the Mason girl?"

"Not that I know of," Jim said, and saw that the blonde girl seemed somewhat relieved. "Are you still in love with him, Louise?"

"Yes. I can't help myself, Rowdy."

"He's no-good."

"That's not true," she said, quickly angry. "It's just that he's so ambitious, too much in a hurry for success. Dad says that Cole is clever enough, that he just made a mistake. Dad would give him another chance—for me—if he'd only straighten himself out. I've humbled myself and begged him to pull himself out of it and—"

"Out of what?"

"He's been drinking heavily ever since Dad fired him."

"Oh."

"And that's not the worst of it," Louise went on. "I had a talk with Mike Hogan today. Mike is still friendly with him, and Mike—well, it's easy to get Mike to talk. He told me that Cole has made some sort of a deal with a speculator named Maury Vance."

Jim frowned. He knew Vance, a crooked speculator, a promoter of many oil stock swindles.

Maury Vance acquired an oil lease, hired a wildcat driller, sold stock, and absconded with the money. He got away with it because he always maneuvered the various oil companies he founded into bankruptcy, so that it appeared like a legitimate if ill-advised deal.

Jim asked quietly, "What's he up to with Vance?"

VII

LOUISE SHOOK her head. "I only know what little Mike Hogan told me," she replied. "Mike says that they've got a scheme on to take over the well at M7 Ranch, once you bring it in. That's why I thought Cole may be seeing Tracy Mason. I—I guess I'm plenty jealous, Rowdy. But I just can't help it. I love that man."

"Well, I'm sure he hasn't been seeing Tracy," Jim said. "And I don't think she'd make a deal with him. More likely he and Vance are trying to find a way to get rid of me and force her into a deal. I'll have a talk with Mike Hogan."

He tried to find Hogan after leaving Louise, but after nearly an hour of visiting saloons, honkatonks, and gambling houses he was convinced that the man wasn't in town. Everybody had seen him "an hour or so ago." By chance Jim stopped in at the Jackpot Pool Room and found a man who knew Hogan well. He was a shifty-eyed little man, who whispered, "It ought to be worth something to know where Hogan is, Rowdy."

"Maybe."

"Fifty dollars."

"You're loco, Nick."

Nick grinned slyly. "Pay me if you think it's worth that much," he said, low-voiced. "Hogan's thick as thieves with Maury Vance and Cole Avery. They've got some kind of a big deal on the fire. A big-money deal. Hogan rounded up a bunch of plug-uglies after dark and they left town on the quiet. Hey, Rowdy—"

Jim was already heading for the door. He called over his shoulder, "I owe you that fifty, Nick!"

He left the pool room at a run, and he was scared. The Hogan-Avery-Vance crowd had seen him arrive in town early this evening, and no doubt believed that he intended to make a night of it. They'd seen it as their opportunity to pull off whatever it was that they had planned for the drilling at Brenoso Creek. It couldn't be anything else.

Jim didn't want a case of nitrogylcerine riding with him, the way he intended to drive, for the explosive, unlike dynamite, was tricky stuff that was apt to go off with even a slight jolt. And if tweive quarts blew up, nothing would be left of man, horses or buckboard. Jim put the explosives back on the warehouse loading platform, untied the team, jumped to the seat, and started the horses with a yell and a slap of the reins.

For a liveryman, McDade kept good animals. The horses were in good condition and eager to run. Rowdy Jim raced away from Espada, along the north road. It was dark, the moon hidden behind clouds, but he knew the road well enough by now, and besides his alarm made him reckless. He had the horses hitting a gallop.

Control of oil lands wasn't always obtained by scrupulous dealings, and there were times when tricky schemings weren't enough. Violence and bloodshed had won many a valuable lease, just as gold mines and rangeland had been so won. With a man like MauryVance backing Cole Avery, and Avery hating Rowdy Jim Kane, anything could be happening at Brenoso Creek. Hogan hadn't taken a bunch of Espada toughs out there unless he meant to cause real trouble. Jim visualized his rig being wrecked, maybe dynamited.

IT WAS a nightmare, and, fast as the team was, he wasn't traveling fast enough. He hadn't realized that M7 Ranch was so far from town. He began yelling when he saw the lights of the ranchhouse, and when he rolled into the yard Tracy was in her doorway and the two cowhands came running from the bunkhouse.

"Trouble at the well, Ben!" he shouted. "Bring your guns!"

He drove on, though now the team, lathered and blowing, took it at a slower pace. He was still a half mile from the camp when he saw the glare of a fire, ruddy bright against the darkness. The flames blossomed hugely, spread a pink glow against the dark sky. The fire was some distance north of the well, back through the rocky stretch through which the Brenoso flowed. A brush fire. The wind was from the north and blowing hard, blowing the

widening wall of flames toward the well. Hogan and his toughs had touched off their fire with the wind in mind.

A giant boulder had forced a hairpin bend in the road, and the racing rig didn't quite make it. The buckboard skidded, struck a rock with a noisy splintering of wheel spokes. The light wagon toppled and Jim was thrown from it. He landed hard, was dazed by the jolt. He picked himself up, forced himself into a staggering run. The team and wrecked buckboard had come to a stop just beyond. He passed them and ran on.

There were shadowy figures about the derrick. Jim was about to call to them when caution warned him that the men there couldn't be his men. Hank and the Mexicans would certainly have gone to fight the fire, to beat it out before it endangered the well.

He had guessed right. A voice called, "Hurry it up, Hogan!"

Jim knew that voice: Cole Avery's.

Anger drove him. He had recovered from the shock of his spill, and as he kept running, he caught his second breath. They'd set the fire to draw his men away from the well, figuring that the growth of brush close to it was too sparse to carry the flames to the derrick and the rig. So they were now free to wreck the job by some other means, by dynamiting it, Jim was sure. He was close when they heard him.

A man yelled, "Watch it! Somebody's coming!"

Jim lunged at the fellow, crashed into him, bowled him over backwards. The man grabbed Jim's leg, tripped him. Jim fell to his hands and knees, and when he rose three more of the crowd came from behind the boiler at a run and jumped him. He struck out, experienced a wild satisfaction at the feel of flesh against his fist. They crowded in close, so many of them, that he couldn't miss as he stood braced and slugged it out with them. He heard Mike Hogan yell something from the drilling platform beneath the derrick. He heard, too, a drumming of hoofs.

Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez were coming, and for once he was glad.

Hogan yelled something again, and the toughs broke off their attack on Jim and scattered in sudden flight. Hogan ducked away from the derrick, and Rowdy Jim went after him. Hogan was fast on his feet, but another man, one that Jim saw now for the first time, retreated at a slower pace. In face, this one ran with a lurching gait—like a drunk, Jim reflected—and screamed horsely for Hogan to wait for him. It was, of course, Avery.

Here was better game, and Jim jumped him with a wild shout. At the same moment, but some distance away, old Ben Monahan and Miguel Gomez at last had their opportunity. Shots crashed, and men cried out in panic.

Then the blast came.

There was a bright flash, a thunderous noise, a scream from Cole Avery, and a stab of pain for Rowdy Jim Kane. Then nothing at all.

FOR A long time Jim hovered on the borderline of consciousness, so that what happened to him was like a bad dream. He was convinced that the doctor from Espada took a fiendish delight in prolonging the business of digging that fragment of boiler plate out of his left side. He was equally sure that the wagon that hauled him to M7 headquarters went by way of the Mexican border. But finally he was abed in Tracy's house, no longer tormented, and he sank into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, Tracy was bending over him. It was broad daylight, and there was an anxious look in her silver-gray eyes.

"Jim, how do you feel?" she asked.

"Wonderful, with you so close," he said. "How bad is it?"

"Not too bad, the doctor said."

"Cole Avery?"

He watched her closely as he spoke the name, but saw no change in her expression. Tracy said simply, "About as badly hurt as you are, Jim. No worse." Then, as an afterthought, "He was here until an hour ago, then Louise Marlowe came in her carriage. She took him home with her. I guess she thinks that she can give him better care than I—than he'd receive from people

who care nothing about him."

Jim thought: She means that. It was crazy of him to be jealous of Cole Avery. But her not caring about Avery didn't mean that she cared about Rowdy Jim Kane.

He said, "They dynamited the rig?"

"Just the boiler," Trace told him. "Hogan had charges set for the derrick, but didn't get a chance to light the fuses. Everything is all right except the boiler. Hank and the Mexicans put out the brush fire. Ben caught Mike Hogan, and took him to Espada to the sheriff. The rest of the crowd escaped. I guess the sheriff will investigate and—" Her face clouded. "And Cole will be in trouble."

"Louise will get him off."

"I hope she can't. He deserves to be punished."

"I'm going to shoot the well as soon as I get back on my feet," Jim said. "You'll get your oil, Tracy. I'm sure of it now; I feel it. We'll force a deal on Dan Marlowe, so you can cash in right away. We'll work through Louise. We'll offer to go easy on Avery if she gets Dan to handle your oil from Brenoso Creek to the refinery. You'll get your K Bar Ranch, Tracy."

Tracy nodded. She didn't look as happy as Jim expected.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I—I'm wondering what you will do, Jim."

"Yeah," said Jim, and he too began to wonder.

HE'D MAKE a lot of money out of the well, since he was a partner. And a man with a lot of money wouldn't want to go on being a wildcatter. He looked back on his past life and couldn't understand why he had enjoyed it so much. Work hard to earn some money, then squander the money and think that painting a town red in the company of fairweather friends and flossy women was fun. It had been kid stuff, and now he felt grown up. He'd changed. Because of this girl, he'd changed—and for the better. His past way of life had been no good.

He said, "Tracy, do you think you could make a rancher of me?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Forget it. It was just a thought."

"What kind of a thought?" Tracy persisted. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Rowdy Jim Kane. I never thought I'd see a time when you'd be afraid to say what was in your mind."

"I just don't feel so rowdy any more."

"Must I say it for you, then?"

He stared up at her, incredulous. "All right," he said. "You're asking for it. Honey, I'm crazy in love with you. I want you to marry me. If you think you can make a rancher of me—" He sighed. "I guess not. I'm not your kind. Forget it."

Tracy laughed. "Now you're making up my mind for me," she said in a tone of mock rebuke. "Jim, don't stop being rowdy. Don't be so blame tame!"

She bent over him, and if ever a man was startled by a kiss, it was Rowdy Jim Kane.

He managed to lift his weak arms and put them about her. After a time he stopped marveling that such wonderful luck should happen to an oil-smeared wildcatter.

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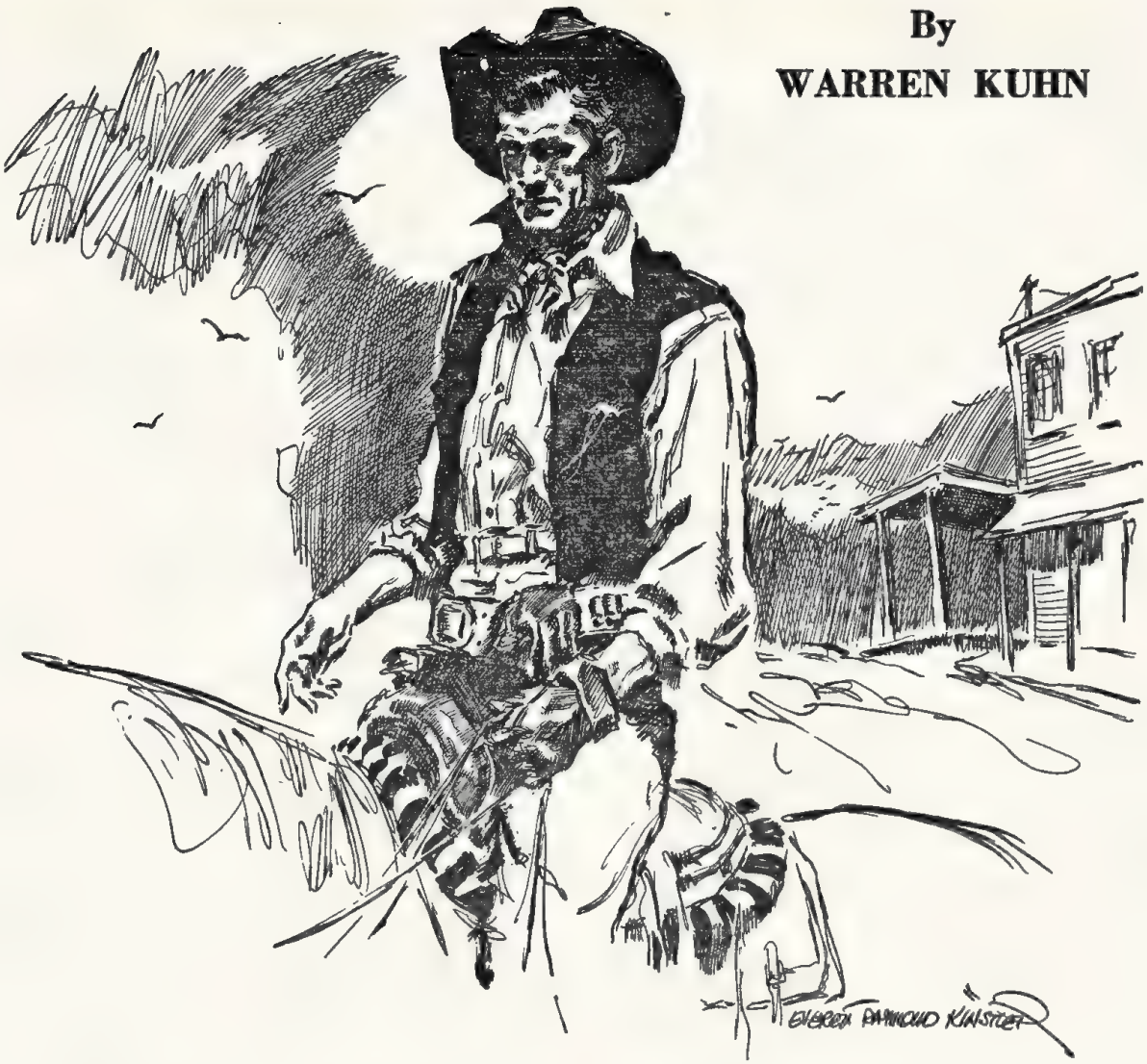


LAST GUN, LAST BULLET

He was sick of violence, yet always there was someone to push him once more

REAGAN came over the hill, his rump in the broken saddle and his ankle bones stiff from the cracked boots he'd found behind Dodge City's best hotel. He was a tired man, a worn man, with everything from his grimy trousers to the Zuni band that rimmed his low-crowned hat a borrowed thing. Some would've said Reagan wasn't any better than a reservation brave, living on dubious charity.

But two things he owned. And both were things of his past. The lean-ribbed, cinnamon mare that had once been a cutting pony, the mark of his trade. And the old, oiled Colt in the cut-down holster which was the mark of another—and later—profession.

And there's Blue Jay, Reagan thought to himself, glad to see it and gladder still to know it was there. Last stop before the Wyoming country and this was strange land for Lee Reagan. But he smiled a little because Wyoming was just beyond, strange, too, but with cattle and ranchers

who needed all the punchers they could get. And there was no worry about a man's past.

Reagan eyed the spraddle of shacks and closed assay offices that once had been booming Blue Jay. He pushed his tongue over dry lips. He was parched with the dust of a dozen hungry dry camps and the few shacks ahead meant one last drink. He rode past the rickety remains of a smelter left to crumble when the Blue Jay lode petered out, and reined the pony at the lone saloon.

Inside he bellied to the planking and watched the barkeep pour. Several others lolled in the place; the usual leftovers of towns like Blue Jay—miners still dogging out their tiny claims, seedy hangers-on and some local riders.

Once, he remembered, his belly had never leaned against a bar top. Once, Reagan could still recall, he'd sat only in corners, his back to the wall. He shook his head, seeing his tired hand spill some of the whisky. Once he could square-shoot the center of a trey of spades snapped fluttering into the air.

Once—a long time ago. His throat was dry. Once—when he had nerve, he thought bitterly. And now he had to get his whisky by tricks. He drew his gun and caught the bartender's eye.

"Watch," Reagan said and flipped his wrist. The gun shot up, arched, dropped into a series of spins. Reagan caught it deftly in his other hand, flipped it again, hands flashing. The barkeep stared. There was a growing silence behind Reagan.

He turned, flipping the gun high. Three figures watched him from a nearby table, but Reagan's eyes were on the gun. In Tombstone he'd flipped his Colt like this for ten minutes straight and won a full bottle of Dublin Cream, the best whisky he'd had in months.

Then, from the table, one man said something. Another roared laughter and brought down a hand to smash a glass on the table top. The noise threw Reagan off; the gun thumped to the floor, skidded.

There was more loud laughter and Reagan saw the kid at the table, no more than twelve or thirteen summers old, bend for the gun. A boot kicked and the kid tumbled backwards. Reagan snatched up the gun himself and stood before the table.

The one who had done the booting was grizzled, old, the tendons of his neck and wrist like rope under the skin. His beard was gray, unkempt; his eyes narrow-set and watchful. Those eyes mocked Reagan.

You're old, Reagan thought, but I've seen you before. Without the beard then, but with the same dirtiness in your eyes. Only he was too tired to try to remember and so Reagan glanced at the old man's companion and saw tight levis and cheap, yellow-butterfly boots and a sweat-rimy, fancy shirt. He didn't miss the tied-down gun.

"Quite a trick, hombre," the old one said. "Takes sure fingers, that does." His eyes seemed to pull closer together under the gray eyebrows. "Knew another hombre did that once. A Johnny Reb."

First they laugh at you, Reagan thought tiredly, hardly listening. Then maybe the barkeep would give him a quick, free one.

And then he stopped for the fancy one was talking.

"No Reb's that fast, Corley."

The name came like a blow across Reagan's neck. And he understood the old man's mocking eyes.

His own eyes fixed on the batwings, Reagan forced his legs to move, fighting the pride and the queasy knots of fear churning his belly. His back felt broad as a barn. Walk, he told himself thickly. Get to the door and keep walking.

HE WAS outside in the night, and a figure moved at his elbow. Fear leaped in his stomach and then he recognized the boy who had been kicked. He spun away quick, leaned against the wall, breathing hard. His face was greasy with perspiration. I'm sick rotten with fear, he thought, and hated himself for it.

Wind tugged at the batwings. Reagan flattened, his hand tight, unable to draw.

The kid watched him.

"Go away," Reagan said and wiped his face.

Then the kid shoved a small bottle into Reagan's hand. Reagan stared at it uncomprehendingly. It was cheap whisky.

"Go on, Mr. Reagan," the kid said in an awed tone.

The words came from Reagan too quick, made gruff by the thickness in his throat.

"How do you know my name?"

The boy was suddenly frightened.

"I—my paw—he and Vales were using it."

And your paw is Corley, right? Absalom Corley. Reagan thought.

Reagan looked close at the boy.

"Was this your idea, son? Or your your paw's?"

The kid was nervous, but he squared his jaw and his chest came up like a little bantam. And Reagan suddenly knew that he liked the boy.

"I snuck the whisky out for you myself."

Sure you did, Reagan thought, feeling sorry for the kid. And knowing, too, his father would be right happy about that, even if he did use his boot on the boy. Absalom Corley was always one to play cat and mouse with a man.

Play, Reagan thought, and then drill him plumb center midway down the back.

"You mad at me, Mr. Reagan?"

Reagan, lost in old memories—and old hates—looked up and then he grinned. He drank some from the bottle, handed it back.

"Thanks, son. That's all I need."

"My name's Luke, Mr. Reagan, sir," the boy said, holding to the bottle with two eager hands. "Are you really the old gun-fighter, Mr. Reagan? Really?"

Reagan . stood listening, flatfooted, buried under by it. A long time ago, he too had thought there was no one greater than a man with a fast gun. Or a reputation.

"Why didn't you talk back to Vales," the boy asked then, the words tumbling out. "He thinks he's a big punkin, but you sure could've—"

"I could've got myself killed," Reagan said, interupting.

"You're funnin' me, ain't you, Mr. Reagan?"

Funning you, son, Reagan thought bitterly. Fun to know you're lickspittle scared, afraid to turn, afraid to draw, afraid to see the smoke of the other gun and feel the smash of lead in your ribs.

"Go ask your paw, son," Reagan said instead and stepped down into the dark street. "He'll tell you all about me." He mounted. The boy rushed to grab his stirrup.

"No, Mr. Reagan. He'd just fun me, too."

"I ain't funning you, boy."

Reagan watched Luke's eyes widen, saw the boy begin to understand. It was like seeing all the frightened years catching up to a man all at once, mirrored there in the look of disbelief on the boy's face. Reagan had to say something more, too, remembering how the truth of it had hurt him once. Long ago.

"The fact is," Reagan said quietly, "I like living, boy. Not dying."

Then turning away from the kid there in the street, he urged the little mare out from the hitchrail, feeling the whole black of the night pull in around him, lost and empty.

STRAW was jabbing his neck, jabbing it hard. Reagan grunted in his sleep, still fighting the devils that had come to dance in his dreams. But the straw kept jabbing him and he woke, sat up.

Around him the loft was deserted, the stalls below beginning to stir with the restless morning movements of horses. The night before came back to him slowly. He had tried his gun twirl on the hostler, but it hadn't worked. His old yellow slicker had to pay for oats for his horse and for the dubious privilege of laying his own head down in the dirty loft straw above.

Now he wondered dully if Corley remembered him, although he knew it to be a vain hope. Absalom Corley's busi-

ness once had been built on remembering the way a man rode or the way he talked. Or even, Reagan thought, the fancy tricks he pulled.

Corley. Absalom Corley, that was the name. A funny religious name for a man to have who was more devil than anything else. Corley had been a bounty hunter, although there were other names men called him by. Corley hunted men for the money on their heads; in Corley's rifle sights a man died bushwhacked or asleep. No other way. Corley's way was legal, too, with a special deputy's warrant tucked away in his saddlebags.

Reagan shook his head, thinking of the boy. Luke, the kid had called himself. Luke had a clean, bright look like a young pine in the high rocks. Reagan found it hard to believe he was Corley's boy, the son of a man who had lived by the sale of bodies brought in stinking and floppng, head-down across a frightened mule.

And now Corley knew Reagan was in town. Deep in him, Reagan felt fear. How far did a man have to run, how long did the years stretch out before the past was forgotten? Reagan had ridden the owl-hoot, that was true, and men had died from his guns, but each standing before him, drawing iron.

Only once had someone died who wasn't packing a gun.

Corley had tracked him down in a crowded passenger car of the Denver & Rio Grande. Reagan had stepped out to the platform and Corly had followed, a shotgun hidden under his coat. But a young woman had come out suddenly and Corley's blast had killed her. Reagan had been hit, too, but the jail doctor had been good. As for Corley, the woman's death finished him—and his trade.

Yet neither then nor in the jail years that followed had Reagan been able to forget the sodden whiteness of the woman's face as she had fallen under Corley's badly aimed gun. Reagan blamed himself, cursing the fates that had made him walk out on that platform. He hated Corley, but he hated himself more. In the end it changed him. When they set him free, he was a burned-out hollow man, afraid even of the dead weight of the gun at his hip, a gun he used only to twirl himself a supper or a drink.

And then, it was three months ago now, he'd heard of the need for punchers in the Wyoming territory. The vast, northern range needed men and asked no questions. Reagan had torn his mind with doubt and finally decided; once cattle and a cow pony had been his life; it would be again. It was a brand new chance.

Only now there was Corley, again. And Corley had never forgotten. Reagan knew Corley blamed him for his ruin and Corley's hate had festered for years. Now they were both here and Corley would kill him. It was as simple as that. Unless he ran.

"Hey, you up there!"

The runty hostler had flung open the stable doors and the gray, early morning filled the stalls.

"This ain't no dang hotel," the hostler complained. "That slicker of yours didn't buy no two-day snooze."

Reagan climbed down, feeling the grubbiness of dirt under his clothes. He wondered how it would feel to have a home place, with water steaming on a stove and a blanket to pull back over your head on a cold morning.

He saddled his horse and walked it outside. The morning was gray and somber, the sky overcast. His stomach was empty and the chilliness was no help. Reagan ached for coffee, but he was in no mood for all that business with his gun. Why fight it, he told himself, sourly. Run.

His foot going to the stirrup, he reached for the pommel. And then he looked up and knew his decision had come too late.

A horseman jogged toward him, a lone, thin figure under that gray sky. A coat was pulled tight around the rider's chest, but flapped open at the thighs. It was Vales, Corley's companion, and where the coat opened, a gunbelt showed.

Vales was watching him, the pony slowing to a walk. Ragan could see the brass

cartridges at Vales's wrist.

Like a row of shiny pennies, he thought. For a dead man's eyes.

Reagan looked carefully about the street. There were few people abroad. Not enough to swear who slapped leather first, or to see if someone was waiting in a side alley with a lined-up Winchester.

But Corley was not in evidence. If he was about, he was remaining well hidden. With Corley that was an art.

VALES was almost at the end of the next hitchrack, about forty feet away. Regan turned full so he was facing the rider. The old birds of fear were thudding and banging in Reagan's stomach. He tried to flex his fingers, ready for the draw he knew he'd have to make. They were like carved bones jutting out from his hand. a cold sweat covered him.

Vales skillfully quieted the pony with his knees, stopping it a few feet off. Reagan watched and knew Corley had had his way at last.

"Your name Reagan" Vales sat relaxed in the saddle.

"Yes," Reagan said. "That's my name."

Vales grinned a little, cocking his head slightly like a lazy cat measuring a mouse.

"Corley tells me you're something with a gun."

"I don't know," Reagan said.

"Speak up, mister," Vales said. "You know how to shoot a gun?"

Reagan nodded.

"You're being mighty quiet for a gent who did all those tricks last night."

"I don't want any trouble with you, mister," Reagan said. The words tasted like wet clay in his mouth.

Vales grinned and worked his shoulders under the coat.

"Have you ever heard of my shooting, Mr. Reagan"

Reagan was silent, his hand a dead weight.

"What do I have to do to prod you, Mr. Reagan?" Vales said then. "Like maybe you're a lousy Reb who didn't know when the war was over?"

Regan felt his lips tighten.

"Or maybe you're a dirty half-breed. Just the yellow leftovers from some squaw's blanket."

"Mr. Reagan!"

Regan had a quick picture of Luke darting toward them. And of Absalom Corley lifting a shotgun astride a horse in the alley opposite.

Reagan heard Vales curse and he caught the motion of Vales's arms just as the blast of a scatteregun filled the early morning. Wood and glass splintered somewhere in a store front and Reagan ducked, the heavy gun coming free.

Vales's horse bucked and Vales was fighting to throw a second shot. Reagan twisted, firing, and Vales was spinning, going back, opposite to the motion of his horse, falling into the street.

Reagan came up and saw Corley wheel his horse and run, shotgun held high. Then young Luke was there, eyes wide, thin chest heaving.

"They had you pinned, Mr. Reagan," Luke gasped. And then, incredulously he said, "He—he was waiting with a shotgun!"

Like always, son, Reagan almost said. How much, he wondered, did the boy know about old Corley? Reagan found himself worried about Luke. Vales lay dead because of the boy. And Reagan was alive.

And so was Corley.

"Where's your place, Luke?"

"About six miles out, past the arroyo," the kid said. "We ain't going there, are we?"

Without answering Reagan pushed through the gathering crowd to his horse, mounted and nodded behind him to Luke.

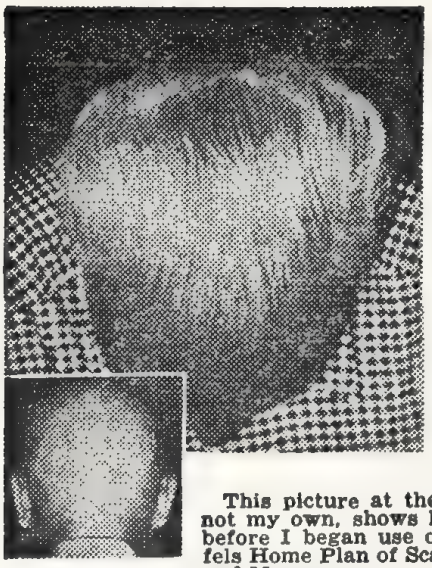
"Can I go with you?" Luke brightened.

"Just the six miles to your place," Reagan said.

When the boy started to argue, Reagan cut him off.

"Corley's your father, boy. You're going home."

"But Mr. Reagan, he ain't. He's just my step-paw. He took me in when my



White hair grew back on my bald head

after using the Brandenfels System

—then turned dark!

By John Wilgar

This picture at the left, although not my own, shows how bald I was before I began use of the Brandenfels Home Plan of Scalp Applications and Massage.

I'm 60 years old and today I look like the picture at the right. Not so long ago I was bald as a billiard ball. I had lost all my hair in less than a year.

I was several months trying to decide what to do. A "clinic" in a nearby big city said their treatments would cost several hundred dollars — which I didn't have. Then a friend at work told me about a Brandenfels advertisement he had seen, and I looked it up.

I'll Admit I Was Skeptical

I'll admit I was skeptical but I reasoned I had "everything to gain and nothing to lose." The Brandenfels ad held out hope for the bald and balding and showed pictures before and after. Also, the Plan was to be used right at home, without expensive office calls. If certified public accountants had audited over 20,000 reports and letters telling of one or more benefits, there must be something to it. So I would try it. How thankful I am that I made that decision. In about 8 weeks I began to see new hair! It was white, however, and mine had been dark. But the baldness was disappearing!

People Were Amazed

Finally, in about 36 weeks I had a nice head of white hair as you can see in the picture above. People in the plant where I work were amazed. And then another wonderful thing happened—the white hair started to turn dark. Today it's almost as dark as before I lost it.

On the basis of my own experience I would urge every bald or balding man, woman, or child, to take hope for new hair with the Brandenfels Plan. And I wish you could talk with my fellow workers who saw what happened to me.

Over 20,000 Testimonials

Renewed hair growth, relief from dandruff scale, lessened hair fall, and improved scalp conditions—one or more of these benefits are named in over 20,000 reports and letters received in the Brandenfels office (CPA audit and affidavit).

Medical research has shown that even on smooth bald scalps there may still be enough life in the hair roots (follicles) to again begin hair production with proper stimulation.

I Didn't Delay

In my own case I feel sure one of the reasons I was able to regain my hair was because I didn't wait too long. If I had gone longer before starting the Brandenfels Plan many hair roots might have lost all life.

The Brandenfels Home Plan of Scalp Applications and Massage offers real and tangible prospect of success in a substantial number of cases, although as with any remedy, results may vary with individuals. These varying results arise from systemic differences, general health, or localized scalp conditions. Some one or more of these factors was doubtless responsible for my hair coming back white, when turning dark. Others might not have the same experience.

Don't Wait

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own paw died. Paw—my paw—used to work with Mr. Corley and he gave him some money to keep me when he died."

"You ain't Corley's boy?"

"Honest, Mr. Reagan, I ain't."

With the boy aboard, Reagan jogged the mare out of town. The pock marks of the mines looked down with old eyes at them as they passed beneath. Up past the ridge tops where the country climbed into still higher mountains, rain clouds gathered thickly.

Wyoming seemed a far, far piece, Reagan thought as he rode, the boy holding on to him from behind.

But despite the tense drawstrings in his belly the fight had put something back into Reagan. He couldn't have named it if he wanted to, only that it was there and it helped. He kneed the horse on gently.

CORLEY'S place was what once had been a mine office, with its rear end shoved hard against the rocky hills. Someone had built a shelter for tools, too, a long time ago and Corley had added some green logs and made a lazy man's corral for his two or three horses some distance from the shack. Brush grew thick and unkept about the logs, and there was a well.

Most important was the limp smoke rising from a stovepipe over the shack. Reagan saw that first, through the drizzling rain. He wiped the wet from his face and spoke back over his shoulder.

"Looks like he's home, boy."

Luke said something, his face muffled by Reagan's shoulder, and slid down, his shoes sinking into the sandy mud that was thick about the house. The kid paused and looked up, rain dripping off the lines of his face. It was a thin sort of face, friendly, but behind the smile in the kid's eyes was the pained look of a whipped dog creeping back to its damp pile of rags.

"Couldn't I—" Luke mumbled. "Couldn't I go with you, Mr. Reagan?"

Reagan's body was wet clear through, his thighs and back stiff from the wet slide of the saddle. He listened to the rain hitting the low places in the muddy yard with an ugly plop-plop.

As he talked, Reagan looked away, talking to the popped stitching on his saddlehorn, seeing the wet red of rust on the old iron apple beneath. He shook his head, slowly.

"I ain't even got a place, Luke. Not yet anyway. Corley's got a home for you, son. A place to lay your head down when you're dog-tired, Luke."

Don't give it up, he thought of telling the boy. No matter how bad it's still a place. Maybe in Wyoming he'd have such a place; he'd work for it, Reagan knew. Work hard. Right now he thought he was still only a run-down gunhand who for a little while had almost felt he was young and full of the old vinegar again.

The look must have shown on his face.

"Well, Mr. Reagan," the kid said. "Glad to have met up with you."

The boy turned, headed for the house, his old clothes sticking to him like hair to a skinned hide. Didn't even have a slicker for him, Reagan thought, watching. Not even a slicker.

Then the door of the shack was opening and Corley's head stuck out, one hand held high against the wind-pushed rain. Corley's beard looked wild and bushy there in the door with the light shining out past him.

Corley shouted, "Where have you been, you shiftless fool?"

Reagan saw the boy stop, hunch back, and Corley made a move to step out, his hand raised. Reagan slid down. Mud sucked under his bootheels.

"I brought the boy home, Corley," Reagan said. And he heard himself add, "You left in too dang much of a hurry to take him yourself."

Corley peered at him and then his hand darted back inside the door, came out, holding the inevitable shotgun. Reagan kicked, mud, moving fast and yanked the double barrels down, pushed his face close to Corley's.

"You're some father," he said, his heart hammering. He shoved Corley aside and

pulled Luke into the shack with him. It was warm and dry and comfortable inside, the rain hitting the boards above and some of it running down to sizzle against the bellied stove.

Corley stepped back, his eyes thick with hate, and Reagan threw the shotgun across the table. It skidded, spun around, the stock teetering half off the far side.

"There's the gun, Corley," Reagan said flatly. "And when you do your next bushwhack job with it, keep the boy clear of your dirt, hear? Or I'll be back."

Contempt shone in Corley's yellow eyes.

"Vales would've cut you down if it hadn't been for this no 'count kid."

Luke's voice flared. "There ain't nobody faster'n Mr. Reagan!"

"So," Corley grunted. "You even got the kid praisin' you, huh? Well, I can knock that out of him."

"Just remember what I said, Corley." Reagan turned to Luke. "Take care of yourself, boy," he said and smiled, and went back out into the rain.

Almost to his horse, hand rising to the wet cantle, he heard the slushing sound of running boots, then Luke's yell. Even as he turned, going to his knees, he knew what he'd see, and all he could think of

(Turn page)

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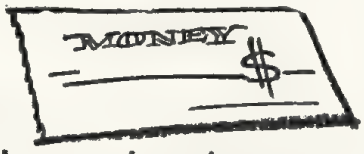

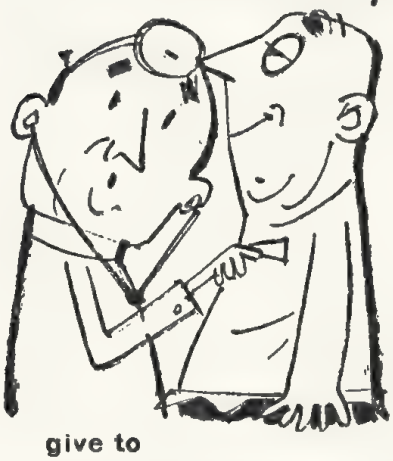

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was how thick the mud would be under his mouth when he fell.

Corley was coming out of the cabin, running low, the shotgun coming up. Corley was cursing.

Luke shouted from the door. "He had shells in his pocket!"

And Reagan knew he had to shoot, his hand going woodenly for his gun. The savage shudder of Corley's blast tore the rain over his head and Reagan fired. And Corley was down, the red staining and washing away in the rain.

Reagan came to stand over him and Luke moved up quietly. The boy kept his eyes off the sodden, bearded figure in the mud and looked at Reagan, the cold drizzle washing his lips. And he said, holding tight to the tremor that wanted his voice: "Are you okay, Mr. Reagan?"

Reagan nodded, his hand hanging heavy with the pistol. And Luke looked down then, forcing himself to look. And his voice came in a whisper, but it was there, meaning what it said.

"I'm sure glad you're all right, Mr. Reagan. I sure am."

The rain was letting up and Reagan felt the mare work as she haunched down through the hills. The saddle was rain-slimed and his holster a dead-drowned brown and his boots were sodden. But they'd dry and so would the saddle and a man could always oil his gun when he got around to it. The gun sure could wait, he thought. A cowpoke in Wyoming would need a saddle more, and maybe something else.

"There'd better be a stove in Wyoming," he said aloud and grinned, hearing the boy answer him over his shoulder.

"Don't you worry none about a fire for that stove, Mr. Reagan," Luke said. "I can chop wood for a fire like nobody you ever saw."

"And heat water?" Reagan asked, smiling to himself.

"Sure. But what for?"

"A bath," Reagan said. "For both of us. On Saturday nights."

Behind him, he heard the boy start to laugh.

BOOTHILL BLONDE

(Continued from page 56)

Even as Tom watched, he shoved his hand into the hay, and emptied a six-shooter, the muzzle flame buried in the hay. Then he yelled and came sliding down the haylift. Above him in the loft, bright tongues of flame were licking upward. That loft would soon be a blazing hell of fire.

Tom stared, shocked. "Good heavens, Kathy!" he said. "They're going to burn everything to the ground!"

"Yes." Her voice was sober. "Janco has been asking for it, Tom. Only Crider's gun and Jessup's fists with what law we had backing Janco, kept them in line. Even then the seams were cracking, Daddy started it."

Tom Bolling looked at Janice who was beginning to stir, looking bedraggled and wierd in the growing light of the flames from her office, from her barn and warehouse. He shook his head, knowing she deserved no sympathy.

Men were shouting, waving torches, hazing wild-eyed and snorting mules from the barn and corrals. Tom turned to Kathy.

He took her arm and they started walking toward town. Halfway, they stopped and looked back. Janice was on her feet, swaying, then she was running toward the barn and blazing warehouse.

"Kathy, have you got any ties here?"

"No, not any more. Why, Tom?"

"Well, I was thinking, maybe you ought to go to California."

She stood close, looking up into his face soberly. "That's a long way for a lone woman to go, Tom."

"I was thinking you wouldn't be alone," Tom said. "You'd be with your husband."

"Husband? I'm not married." She was smiling.

He grinned. "We could fix that."

"Well, in that case it wouldn't be too far, would it? Are you proposing, Tom?"

"I sure am! How about it—will you marry me, Kathy?"

Her laugh was soft, happy. "Yes, Tom."

He held her to him and kissed her before they started walking toward town.

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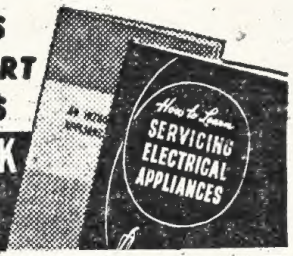

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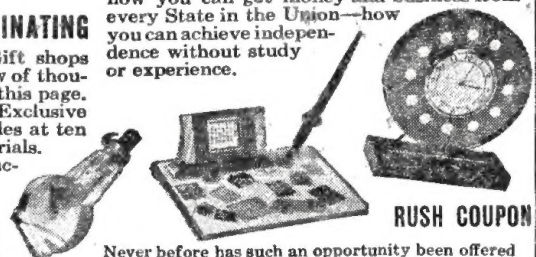

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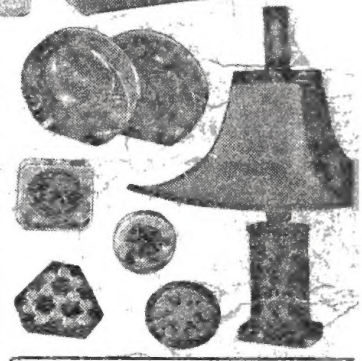

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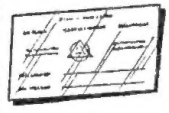

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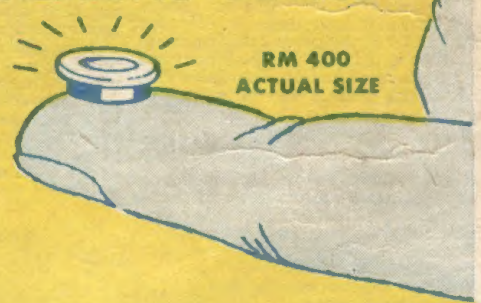

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